



# Institutional Research & Strategy in Higher Education

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# My Goals in this Lecture

- **Reconfirm** the importance of institutional research (IR)
- **Disrupt** the typical way of thinking about IR
- **Reframe** our understanding of who bears the responsibility for IR
- **Offer** four cautionary tales to avoid

# Partial Listing of Credits

- Phil Altbach & Patty Gumport, American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges
- Lee Bolman & Terrence Deal, Reframing Organizations
- Doris Kearns Goodwin, Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln
- James Kouzes & Barry Posner, The Leadership Challenge
- Steven Sample, The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership
- Susan Scott, Fierce Conversations
- William Tierney, The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision-Making: Theory and Practice in Higher Education
- Patricia Witherspoon, Communicating Leadership: An Organizational Perspective
- Robert Zemsky, Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming American Higher Education

Some more about me, and what  
informs my perspective...

# Me

- Psychology, organizational change, and higher education
- Private sector: Xerox, Microsoft, and a leadership training consultant to several multinational companies
- Researcher, tenured full professor, and/or senior administrator at several universities:

UCLA

University of Washington

Yale University

Columbia University

# Setting the Stage

- All organizations succeed or fail as a result of good or bad communication.
- Susan Scott tells us that success or failure happens gradually, then suddenly.
- Leadership matters, and transparent communication is the primary tool of an effective leader.
- Strategic leaders distribute leadership, communicate with many people, and rely on multiple sources of information.

Organizational Theory &  
Development



Leadership & Higher Education  
Development



Implications for the Work of IR

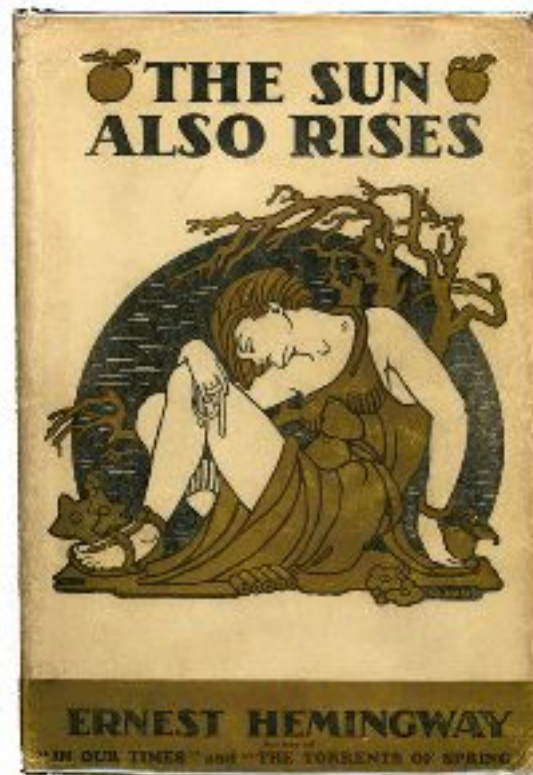
What do the underlined and italicized ideas imply for leaders and organizations, overall?



# *Communication*

- Comes in all shapes and sizes: written, oral, direct, indirect, honest, dishonest, overt, missing
- This is the workhorse of the leader, because it forms the basis for all relationships
- Things are communicated, whether a leader talks about them or not (See Susan Scott's description of the *Mokita*)

Success or failure occurs gradually,  
then suddenly...



Courtesy of Susan Scott, 2004

Professor Sam Wineburg, of Stanford University, once told me, “Jim, there are only three things you need to know to be an effective leader?”

1. Transparency
2. Transparency
3. Transparency

# Leadership is Distributive

- Any person can be a leader
- Effective leaders will seek different people at different times (who have different competencies) to lead in certain situations
- Leadership bubbles up, when a person has the courage to interrogate reality (Scott, 2004)
- Complex problems requires multiple leaders at different levels tackling different pieces

# *Information* versus Data

more than just a semantic difference

But how can we use these ideas to  
form a definition of effective IR?

Communication

Gradually, then suddenly

Transparency

Distributive

Information

# This is my take...

- Effective IR is more than just the mechanics of collecting information. It is the manifestation of, and support for, an institutional commitment to **transparency** and **communication**.
- A university with a culture of inquiry, which is fostered by leaders who seek **information** to understand complexities, will promote effective IR.
- Effective IR is proactive, encouraging the **gradual** gathering of longitudinal, time-dependent, and nested **information**, rather than focusing only on **sudden** episodic issues or challenges.
- Effective IR is an exercise in **distributive leadership** because it is the work of the entire institution. Sometimes it is orchestrated by one office, but it is never solely owned by one office\*.

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*\* I know not everyone has such an office. Be careful what you wish for...*

Any truly effective, innovative, and thriving organization will enjoy:

*a dynamic, ongoing, transparent culture of inquiry that brings multiple constituents, varied sources of information, and competing interpretations to the table, to develop a shared sense of reality*



# These are organizations that:

- Tackle their toughest challenges (Scott, 2004)
- Are willing to interrogate “reality” (Scott, 2004)
- Do not pretend to know what, in fact, they do not (Scott, 2004)
- Foster transparent communication, inviting dissonance and disagreement, in a search for widely-accepted answers
- Use information, in all its forms, as the basis for finding those widely-accepted answers
- Are, by definition, never perfect—they are always evolving
- Operate on the premise of theories that can change, rather than adhering to belief systems that endure

*And don't these ideas form the most basic principles of researchers?*

So what keeps our universities from having a dynamic, ongoing, transparent culture of inquiry that brings multiple constituents, varied sources of information, and competing interpretations to the table, to develop a shared sense of reality?

*Please take a moment to discuss this with a neighbor...*

Most of you will conclude that poor leadership is the problem.

And, you'd be right...

That's depressing, especially when you are not in a position of senior leadership.

# The Funny Thing about Leadership

- If you wait for someone from above to lead, it may never happen.
- The good news is that you can lead, or manage, up the organization.
- ***In fact, institutional researchers are in a unique position to influence change, lead or manage up, and help senior leaders become more strategic.***

But what *self-inflicted* practices get  
in the way?

Remember: These are observed among many colleges and universities  
that have robust IR operations

# The Four Horsemen



Readily found among Institutional Research offices  
at many colleges and universities across the United States

# The Four Horsemen

① Cod Liver Oil

② Good Housekeeping

③ Whacking Moles

④ Quartermaster Confusion

# Cod Liver Oil





# Cod Liver Oil

- We know best, so take this report.
- We know best, and that can't be done.
- We know best, and we cannot work with them.
- Lack of flexibility when it comes to instrument design, methodology selection, and sources of data.

# Good Housekeeping



# Housekeeping

- This is the way we've always done this.
- Spending all your time on routine reporting.
- Limiting possibilities by keeping to self. Not including others because that is beyond the scope.
- Overall, just playing it safe by doing what you are asked to do—never being proactive and suggesting what should be done.

# Whacking Moles



Courtesy of Susan Scott, 2004

# Whacking Moles

- It feels good to tackle *ad hoc* requests.
- But we never create the space to address the fundamental, underlying, challenges of the institution.
- We need to organize ourselves in ways that allow for completing ad hoc requests, while focusing also on strategic, long-term, work.

# Quartermaster Confusion?



# Quartermaster Confusion?

- Have to be both quartermasters—being just one is not enough.
- Have to create workflows that allow for steady supply of information (i.e., a good logistics, efficient supply chain, etc.)
- Also have to be in the crow's nest, looking out for sandbars, icebergs, and interesting new land masses.

# Walk away ideas?

What two things will you do, given what we've discussed this morning?



Questions?