Organizational Redirection in Highly Bureaucratic Environments: De-escalation of Commitment among Division I Athletic Departments

Michael Hutchinson, University of Memphis
Adrien Bouchet, University of Tulsa

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Organizations oftentimes commit to projects and courses of action exceeding the boundaries of economic feasibility (Brockner, 1992; Schmidt & Calantone, 2002). Management theorists have long been intrigued by the phenomenon in which organizations find themselves chasing significant financial profits by expending excessive amounts of resources, eventually unable to recoup invested losses (Ross & Staw, 1993). Amidst evidence of limited profitability (Fulks, 2010), investment in Division I athletics maintains proliferation as few institutions exhibit willingness to engage in de-escalation procedures. The presence and influence of highly bureaucratic environments within the educational setting provides added considerations for the de-escalation process. Investigation of structural inertia and organizational change by Hannan and Freeman (1984) and Zajac and Kraatz (1993) use educational institutions to support the premise of high levels of structural inertia among organizational entities. Although compiling data on containing the ‘arms race’ in college athletics provides insight, perhaps more important is identifying strategies for institutions seeking to break the cycle of escalation regarding traditional Division I athletic commitment. Based on escalation of commitment theory, the purpose of this study was to explore how select institutions have succeeded in commitment redirection within a bureaucratic environment where the norm was to increase commitment.

As proposed by Staw (1976), escalation of commitment theory postulates the potential for both organizations and individuals to become engaged in a cycle of failing courses of action. While prior research has investigated sustained behavior in failing courses of action, limited research has delved into the processes for reversing such cyclical behavior, referred to as de-escalation of commitment (Mähring et al., 2008). De-escalation is defined as “the process of breaking such a [escalation] cycle” (Montealegre & Keil, 2000, p. 419), emphasizing degree(s) of project or behavioral reduction. Although such reduction may manifest itself in the form of abandonment, there is valuable potential for alternative direction opportunities. Thus, de-escalation can further be defined as redirection in the form of “a radical rescoping or redefining of the project” (Montealegre & Keil, 2000, p. 418).

Research concerning de-escalation is primarily confined to a limited number of single instrumental case studies and laboratory experiments (Mähring et al., 2008). In a comprehensive review of de-escalation literature, Mähring et al. (2008) cited only 12 empirical investigations related to understanding de-escalation behavior and processes. Using former escalation research as a foundation, Montealegre and Keil (2000) investigated the sequence of events surrounding the construction of a computerized baggage handling system at the Denver International Airport. Following their examination, Montealegre and Keil (2000) determined de-escalation to be a four-phase process, inclusive of key triggering activities enabling the de-escalation process to progress and achieve completion. The four phases included 1) problem recognition, 2) re-examination of prior course of action, 3) searching for alternative course of action, and 4) implementing an exit strategy. Due to the emphasis of de-escalation research on the for-profit sector, the following hypotheses were put forth in examining this process within the non-profit higher education environment:

H1: Negative feedback will not initially emerge regarding the existing level of commitment to Division I athletics.
H2: Institutional administrators will reassess and redefine the existing degree of commitment to Division I athletics in order to better reflect institutional goals.
H3: Formation of an institutional task force will adversely affect de-escalation progression of existing Division I athletics commitment.
H4: Institutional administrators will acknowledge de-escalation decision-making responsibility and not engage in impression management tactics.

This study adhered to a collective case study methodology, examining the de-escalation process among eight institutions. Based on previous escalation and de-escalation investigation (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010, 2011,
2012), three primary categories of de-escalation behavior within Division I athletics were established and included a) reclassification, b) removal of the football program, and c) restructure of the athletic department. Based on the established criteria, the following institutions were included in this investigation: Centenary College of Louisiana, Birmingham-Southern College, Northeastern University, La Salle University, East Tennessee State University, University of the Pacific, Long Beach State University, and Vanderbilt University.

Participants (N = 33) included decision makers involved in the development and implementation of institutional redirection initiatives, including such titles as President, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Provost, Associate V.P., V.P. for Finance, V.P. for Enrollment, V.P. for Administration, V.P. for Public Affairs, Faculty Athletic Representative, Athletic Director, Senior Associate Athletic Director, and Associate Athletic Director. Data were collected via phone interviews and subsequently analyzed using NVivo 9. In order to facilitate analysis of the collected data and establish trustworthiness, audio-taping, transcription, peer debriefing, and member checking were applied. Further, a three-step coding process was implemented by two coders. Two measures of intercoder reliability (Guetzkow’s U = 0.04; Cohen’s kappa = 0.81) were implemented, both indicating a high degree of agreement between coders.

Findings revealed an absence of negative feedback concerning existing athletics commitment. Contrary to former de-escalation research, a theoretical implication pertains to the expectation of limited negative feedback amidst palpable conditions for de-escalation. More simply, the absence of negative feedback from organizational stakeholders should not be a determinant in relinquishing redirection initiatives. An additional finding identified sustained commitment to a given course of action as attributable to general lack of understanding concerning not only the magnitude of a problem, but the actual problem itself. Upon accurate clarification and redefinition, institutional decision makers subsequently considered alternative approaches to the existing formula in place for athletics management.

Further, several decision makers conveyed the difficulty in implementation due to lengthy institutional deliberation, providing ample time and impetus for highly committed stakeholders to marshal forces in opposition of redirection efforts. Limited stakeholder consultation provides a new perspective on triggering activities within de-escalation initiatives, positing a less candid approach to successful redirection implementation. Finally, findings revealed no empirical evidence of decision maker impression management strategies in order to ‘save face,’ with administrators noting ownership of the decision comprising the nature of education and athletic administration. Perhaps a theoretical justification for ownership of the decision regarding impression management strategies is linked to university leadership. Additional theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.