

From: Lawrence Krauss <[REDACTED]>
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: Lawrence Krauss <[REDACTED]>
Subject: Re: The Heathrow option
Date: Wed, 14 Nov 2018 23:33:38 +0000

This is brilliant. Many thanks..

Lawrence

p.s. needless to say, I agree with your assessment of Amelia and her situation.

Lawrence M. Krauss

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[REDACTED] | [REDACTED]

On Nov 14, 2018, at 3:01 PM, [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Lawrence,

I came across something on the Farnam Street website today that is one explanation for why the ASU administration has behaved the way it has toward you.

I'm sure you already have considered this. But the story is sticky, so I like it.

Here's the story:

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Defensive Decision Making: What IS Best v. What LOOKS Best

“It wasn't the best decision we could make,” said one of my old bosses, “but it was the most defensible.”

What she meant was that she wanted to choose option A but ended up choosing option B because it was the defensible default. She realized that if she chose option A and something went wrong, it would be hard to explain because it was outside of normal. On the other hand, if she chose option A and everything went right, she'd get virtually no upside. A good outcome was merely expected, but a bad outcome would have significant consequences for her. The decision she landed on wasn't the one she would have made if she owned the entire company. Since she didn't, she wanted to protect her downside. In asymmetrical organizations, defensive decisions like this one protect the person making the decision.

My friend and advertising legend Rory Sutherland calls defensive decisions the Heathrow Option. Americans might think of it as the IBM Option. There's a story behind this:

A while ago, British Airways noticed a reluctance for personal assistants to book their bosses on flights from London City Airport to JFK. They almost always picked Heathrow, which was further away, and harder to get to. Rory believed this was because “flying from London City might be better on average,” but “because it was a non-standard option, if anything were to go wrong, you were much more likely to get it in the neck.”

Of course, if you book your boss to fly out of Heathrow—the default—and the flight is delayed, they'll blame the airline and not you. But if you opted for the London City airport, they'd blame you.

At first glance, it might seem like defensive decision making is irrational. It's actually perfectly rational when you consider the asymmetry involved. This asymmetry also offers insight into why cultures rarely change.

Some decisions place the decisionmakers in situations where outcomes offer little upside and massive downside. In these cases, it can seem like great outcomes carry a 1% upside, good outcomes are neutral, and poor outcomes carry at least 20% downside—if they don't get you fired.

It's easy to see why people opt for the default choice in these cases. If you do something that's different—and thus hard to defend—and it works out, you've risked a lot for very little gain. If you do something that's different and it doesn't work out, and you might find yourself unemployed.

This asymmetry explains why your boss, who has nice rhetoric about challenging norms and thinking outside the box, is likely to continue with the status quo rather than change things. After all, why would they risk looking like a fool by doing something different? It's much easier to protect themselves. Defaults give people a possible out, a way to avoid being held accountable for their decisions if things go wrong. You can distance yourself from your decision and perhaps be safe from the consequences of a poor outcome.

Doing the safe thing is not the same as doing the right thing. Often, the problem with the safe thing is that there is no growth, no innovation. It's churning out more of the same. So in the short term, while you may think that the default is a better choice for your job security, in the long game there's a negative. When you are unwilling to take risks, you stop recognizing opportunities. If you aren't willing to put yourself out there for 1% gain, how do you grow? After all, the 1% upsides are more common than the 50% upsides. But in either case, if you become afraid of downside, then what level of risk would be acceptable? It's not that choosing the default makes you a bad person. But a lifetime of opting for the default limits your opportunities and your potential.

And for anyone who owns a company, a staff full of default decision makers is a death knell. You get amazing results when people have the space to take risks and not be penalized for every downside.

Lawrence, the Heathrow Option affects weather forecasts, which is my field, or was before I got interested in climate. I'm a meteorologist by training and inclination. Weather forecasts are made by humans, and the main input they rely on is computer model forecasts. If the human decides to trust the model and essentially just rephrases the model output in terms that a TV audience will understand, then an incorrect or failed forecast can be blamed on a faulty model. But if the human decided the model forecast was flawed and issued a forecast that the human thought was better, then a failed forecast is charged to error and incompetence on the part of the human. In weather forecasting, everybody keeps score, because tomorrow always tells us whether the forecast made today was good or bad, and poor forecasters don't get raises or promotions and sometimes get fired.

I think the ASU rationale, consciously or not, may have been simply that if ASU punishes Krauss, especially through an opaque process, then people will conclude the investigation "proved" his guilt and will think well of ASU. But if ASU gives him a pass, or a slap on the wrist, and then anything reprehensible that Krauss ever does or is ever accused of doing in the future will result in people saying, "ASU had a chance to punish this jerk back in 2018 and they didn't have the backbone to do it, and now look what happened, all caused by incompetent gutless ASU administrators."

Lawrence, I am especially sorry that Amelia was fired. She exuded competence in all my contacts with her re the Mexico City gig, and she was also a very pleasant person. That truly sucks.

Best,

Richard

On Nov 9, 2018, at 9:00 AM, Lawrence Krauss <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Dear Richard:

Thanks so much for the very kind email. You are a gentleman and a scholar, but I already knew that. :)

Your email arrived at a good time. I am in the airport leaving Phoenix. I came to the University today to try and begin to go through my office, and meet a friend/colleague/collaborator who was visiting the University today to give a talk and asked if I could meet him. Just before I was going to go to the colloquium a representative from the Dean's office came to my office to tell me I was not allowed to attend public events at the University. Every time I think ASU has reached a new low, the go lower.. :)

In any case, I firmly believe that living well is the best revenge, and I hope to try and do that. I don't yet know what I will be doing after my retirement officially begins (If ASU lets me get there without renegeing on their agreement) but I am thoroughly enjoying getting to spend so much more time at home with Nancy. That is truly a gift.

Hearing that many at the Bulletin feel as you do also means a lot. I was quite hurt that the Bulletin acted so quickly to disavow me earlier, but I understand the ridiculous nature of the current climate.

And for your amusement, here is something I didn't make public, but it demonstrates beautifully the completely kafkaesque nature of the University investigative procedure. here is an excerpt from the investigative report for one of the many false and silly allegations.. I am "respondent" this excerpt. A is one of my staff, and B is a donor. C, who comes in at the end, is the complainant.. :)

"A recalled Respondent telling her that B had a crush on her or thought she was pretty, or something of that nature, but could not remember specifically what was said. She stated that she remembered B leaving candy for her, but thought it was during a holiday. A stated that she was flattered by B's conduct but it did not make her uncomfortable, as he was "like a father to [her]". According to A Respondent never suggested, joking or otherwise, that A date B to get more money for the Origins Project. Respondent was aware that B had an interest in A who is married, and frequently visited the office, bringing her chocolates and other gifts. Respondent stated that he thought B was in love with A and wanted to marry her. During a meeting, Respondent stated that the team joked that A should date B and "take one for the team".

Factual Determination: Respondent admitted to joking that A should "take one for the team" and date a donor who had a crush on her. While A took no offense to this remark, C did. "

Also, I don't know if you were aware of this, but the University also fired Amelia Huggins in order to support their case against me.

All best, and enjoy your lighter load now that you are leaving the Bulletin. You were a great asset, and I certainly enjoyed being your colleague on the Bulletin.

Lawrence

On Nov 9, 2018, at 7:33 AM, Richard Somerville [REDACTED] wrote:

Hello Lawrence,

I am in Chicago for the Bulletin meeting. It will be my last, as I had decided some time ago that two terms on the SASB was enough.

Rotating out is good for me and for SASB. I believe in the need for new people and new ideas in such groups, and I have other things I want to do as well.

I wanted to let you know that I have followed the ASU decision and related matters closely, including your recent 50-page statement. I think you have been treated shamefully by ASU.

Here I've raised the subject with a few colleagues, and so far, they've agreed with me. I'm a great supporter of women, and I think sexual predators deserve the worst. But you're no Harvey Weinstein.

The show trial format, with lack of transparency, with no safeguards and lacking well-defined procedures, and with ASU administrators as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner — it simply stinks.

I'm sad for the Origins project, but I'm not worried about you. I'm confident you will land on your feet — or already have — and will find many future opportunities and outlets for your talents.

I just wanted to let you know that quite a few other people who have come to know you well via the Bulletin feel the same way.

Very best, from my wife Sylvia too,

Richard

Richard C. J. Somerville
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