

The California City Management Foundation commitment to support professional development is embodied in the Harvard Scholarship Program. I am grateful to the CCMF for the first Harvard Scholarship of 2019-20 and the City of Stockton for the opportunity to attend the *Leadership Decision Making: Optimizing Organizational Performance* course led by Faculty Chair Dr. Lerner. The curriculum focuses on enhancing human judgement to improve decision making and outcomes. This course offers a competitive advantage that will simultaneously support the success of your community and advance your career consistent with the CCMF mission.

There is something special about the environment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The history of intellectual pursuit and concentration of Harvard, MIT, Boston College, Boston University and Northeastern University establish an electric atmosphere filled with curiosity. Cambridge reminds me of Eric Weiner's book *Geography of Genius*. His premise is that in certain places at certain times a collection of people with the intellect, effort and ability come together to produce something truly creative and unexpected. Walking along the Charles River on a fine fall day to class, Cambridge has much in common with Hangzhou, Calcutta, Vienna and the other cities described in Weiner's book. Even the reading material at the local Supercuts (yes...I pay the barber's finder fee) is elevated to include *Entrepreneur and Science*.

The Harvard campus tour and reminders of people who studied there reinforce how special the experience is. It is humbling to be reminded of notable alumni such as Conan O'Brien, Kim Belshé, Michelle Obama and Jeremy Lin. You truly begin to wonder what am I doing here when the tour guide points out Ralph Waldo Emerson's dormitory. As Dr. Lerner pointed out the first day of class, many Executive Education students ask this question despite being selected for the program. In 1844, Emerson noted "of what use is genius, if the organ is too convex or too concave and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?" This captures the essence of the Harvard Kennedy School Executive Education experience. Cutting edge insights presented clearly by world renowned academics in an accessible and applicable format for the practitioner.

The Leadership Decision Making course is founded in insights from psychology, economics and neuroscience and aimed at improving outcomes. The introduction to this material highlights how psychology and neurology move us away from rational decision making and brings to the forefront how lazy, efficient, our brains can be. The Appraisal Tendency Framework articulates how emotions save energy intensive cognitive processing by triggering time-tested response to similar experiences. In other words, the shorter faster emotional response pushes us toward a decision before we have time to think. A good reminder to stop, breathe deeply and ponder the email before hitting send.

The curriculum quickly moves beyond the individual level and introduces the idea that leaders can implement decision architecture to establish default decisions, delegate decisions and improve organizational performance. The *Conversation on Leadership Decision Making* with Dr. Lerner and Nancy Gibbs, Director of the Shorenstein Center and visiting Edward R. Murrow Professor of Practice of Press, Politics and Public Policy, provided practical insights to these concepts. Professor Gibbs shared her experiences as Editor in Chief of TIME and described how she applied these principles to grow the digital audience by 30 million people and provide news to 65 million readers worldwide. She noted that

achieving a plan or vision is about people, culture, ethics and leadership. Leaders need to make good decisions and they need to understand the nexus to the organization and its people.

Insightful conversations occurred all week during the intensive course. With classmates from 16 countries working in non-profit organizations, municipal governments, national governments, and multi-lateral agencies many insights were gleaned from informal discussions during meals and breaks. Where else can you discuss public works projects with the Infrastructure Secretary for the Kenya Government, community engagement with the World Wildlife Fund Conservation Manager from Myanmar, or employee wellness with a United States Navy Rear Admiral?

Debriefing practical exercises with classmates brought deeper understanding of the potential applications of the curriculum. We completed group exercises to test whether we could apply the material to 1) improve rational decision making in other people, 2) incentivize people to make a certain decision, and 3) negotiate for increased mutual benefit. My group included the Board Chair of a Brazilian electric utility, a community organizer from North Dakota and an economic development specialist from Hungary among others. The group proved adept at influencing and manipulating decision making as measured by the 2,000 person study we conducted.

The biggest revelation came from the negotiation exercise and considering the ethical implications of using behavioral science to drive decisions. As noted in the 2009 CCMF article *Council-Manager or "Strong Mayor" The Choice is Clear*, professional city-management offers an opportunity for "merit-based" decisions. However, it is too easy to simply define merit-based decisions as those more aligned with the rational economic decision model than biases and heuristics. We must recognize that professional expertise can create an imbalance between city managers and the communities served. Vested with technical knowledge and persuasive skills it is too easy to create a rational argument for a particular alternative. In the negotiation exercise I achieved near maximum benefit and my unprepared partner did not achieve his minimum. Our agreement was quickly retooled to arrive at an acceptable deal for both of us in the time available, but we failed to achieve maximum mutual benefit. More importantly, three hours later my partner said in an accusatory tone "I gave in too early." Even though I provided concessions and we fixed the agreement together, my partner was more than dissatisfied.

While initially frustrated by my negotiating partner's lack of preparation, an unexpected lesson was revealed. Since class ended, I ponder how the pressure to deliver sound policy alternatives under deadlines fosters a tendency to get the job less with less input and what effect that has on public trust. To effectively involve neighborhoods, civic leaders and businesses in democratic decision making city managers must address imbalances in technical knowledge, political influence and affluence to ensure effective decision making. "Unprepared" or unformed partners may lose trust when decisions are imposed, even if the decisions are well-reasoned. The experience fomented a better understanding that community engagement and education is necessary to strengthen neighborhood voices and prepare communities to participate in decision making. An answer that fits within the limits of what is financially, legally, practically and politically feasible is often easily identified. However, if we are to rise above the two-dimensional boundaries of what is feasible to achieve optimal mutual benefit in the community, we must operate in the third dimension of engagement. Trust and mutual benefit are more likely to occur when there is parity among the voices and as city managers we must engage our communities.