



By Steven C. Thweatt

# The Price of

# PARALYSIS

Have you ever been stopped at a traffic light, deep in thought solving one of the world's most vexing problems, and when the light turns green, you remained fixated on your thoughts oblivious to your surroundings? We have all done that at some time, yet when someone reminds us to pay attention with a not-too-gentle blare of their horn, we get jolted into action and accelerate towards our destination . . . or do we? What if you decided to just stay at that light, not moving ahead, until you had resolved your problem? What would that look like? Can you imagine the traffic issues that we would have if people felt empowered to stop and wrestle with their problems until they were all resolved?

Of course this is a very unlikely scenario, and yet there are situations in which people feel that it is perfectly acceptable to take no action at all, given a certain set of circumstances. Not only is this a generally unacceptable approach to problem solving, but this type of paralysis can have far reaching and unintended consequences.

Think about what it would be like if we chose to not take action in certain situations. What would it really hurt? There are probably times that we are all tempted to “do nothing” about a particularly troublesome situation. The last house that we bought developed cracks in many of the walls shortly after we moved in and an investigation showed that the problems stemmed from sagging joists in the crawl space. Further investigation also showed that the cracks had developed long ago, but were patched without any permanent correction to the underlying problems in the structural foundation. The previous owners approach of “doing nothing” to correct the real problem simply postponed the inevitable. Since childhood, we have at times held out hope that if we don’t take whatever difficult action is required to resolve a problem, perhaps it will simply go away. Experience tells us, however, that this type of paralysis only leads to even greater problems as the original problem continues to grow, or even spawns other related problems. Paralysis almost always leads to more serious consequences than taking some kind of action. Think about it. Isn’t inaction actually an action?

Before we look at the potential consequences of decision paralysis, let’s look at some of the common reasons that this might occur. First, we might have what a now-defunct television show terms, “The Fear Factor.” At times we are fright-



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ened by the prospects of making a clear decision and commitment toward a certain plan of action. Our fear is that the wrong decision could have disastrous results and expose our own leadership weaknesses.

Secondly there might be a multitude of potential options available for the particular situation and we are faced with making a decision that requires a commitment to one particular solution over another. The wide variety of solutions available causes paralysis toward any one particular solution.

A third potential reason for inaction is grounded in different people persuading us to lean toward their own personal agendas. If we are not diligent in pursuing the best solu-



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tion, we can be overly influenced toward differing solutions depending on the strength of the people pulling us in their specific direction. Without the ability to discern among the arguments presented and find the best solution, we can appear to flip flop and remain indecisive to the point of paralysis.

Finally, if we only see bad choices surrounding a particularly troublesome situation, we are reluctant to intentionally make a tough decision even in the face of bad alternatives.

I invite you to examine four different areas of responsible leadership and the potential consequences of inaction in each of those areas focusing specifically on organizations, facilities, campuses, and the global impact of decision paralysis.

## ORGANIZATIONS

Are you satisfied with the status quo? Have you achieved the pinnacle of success in your own organization? Perhaps you have, but chances are that you aren't the world leader in organizational development and could use improvements in at least a few areas.

Think about what might happen if you do not take action toward improving your organization. The best you are likely to achieve is your current status quo and you can be certain, that a downward slide is in your future. When you become satisfied with the status quo, problems are often neglected and things that may not seem so bad grow into larger problems until they become significant enough to regularly divert your attention from more important matters. This pattern continues until you spend most of your energies chasing problems with little focus and attention on improvements or strategic efforts. The dog is simply chasing its tail.

This pattern is followed by a steady decline in employee morale. Employees need to have a vision for the future while embracing good values and feel that they are contributing toward a higher level of achievement. This can only be provided by leaders that have enough vision and decisiveness to show the way. Organizational paralysis will decay whatever progress had been previously made toward institutional priorities. Rather than forward momentum taking an orga-

nization to the next level, backward momentum will drop an organization to the next lower rung on the ladder. Momentum is powerful and any momentum is hard to change, but backward momentum is particularly difficult to reverse. With decision paralysis, the entire future of your organization is potentially at risk.



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Deferred maintenance or simple neglect?

## FACILITIES

Imagine doing nothing about the condition of your facilities. Of course a certain backlog of capital renewal is to be expected on almost any campus, except for those fortunate few whose administrators have seen the wisdom in adequate facilities funding strategies. In those rare situations, their resources are sufficient to meet the needs and they seldom face extreme choices in maintenance and capital renewal expenditures. Yet most of us deal with situations that are far from ideal. If we fail to position our decision makers to make the right decisions about allocating resources to support our physical facilities, we will continue to see a steady decline in our buildings, grounds, and infrastructure. This is particularly troublesome since the problem has the propensity to exponentially increase over time. The neglect of our facilities is a certain recipe for disaster.

If our facilities become increasingly neglected, then it follows that our customers will become increasingly unhappy. Systems failures, utility outages, deteriorated finishes and unkempt grounds are only tolerated for so long before changes are demanded. If these persistent problems are the direct result of failing to make the right decisions with whatever resources we have available, or our inability to take action on the most important elements of deterioration, then our career in higher education facilities management could be in jeopardy.

Likewise, a failure to maintain our facilities in a minimum level of condition will result in an exponentially growing backlog of needs. As the backlog grows, more demands are placed on the maintenance staff until they are unable to keep up with the constant failures experienced around campus. The end result is a disaster for the campus and the loss of all credibility for the responsible facilities organization.

Directly related to the deteriorating condition of the facilities and the growing impatience of our customers is the cost of repairs. As conditions decline in our facilities, the measures required to restore them doesn't increase in a straight line equation, but has exponentially increasing implications. The cost associated with repair work is far more severe and costly if our facilities are continually neglected as compared to keeping pace with crucial repairs as they are

discovered. Many of our building systems and their associated infrastructures are interrelated and deterioration in one area will often result in unintended consequences in areas that would otherwise be fine.

One example might be a water leak. If a leak develops in some area and persists from neglect, it will most certainly cause deterioration in many areas that surround the original problem area including staining, rotting and possibly mold. As you can imagine, it will be infinitely more expensive to replace finishes, make structural repairs or clean up a mold problem than it would be to fix the leak when it is initially discovered. This scenario also has the net effect of increasing the cost of capital renewal needs and the total cost of ownership in buildings.

## CAMPUS

As we have already seen, a continuing degradation of our facilities due to decision paralysis has serious implications on the condition of our facilities and their growing capital needs. Neglect of our facilities ultimately leads to a deterioration of our campus infrastructure, even if we don't intend it. When more resources are directed toward mounting facilities issues in response to specific complaints, then our entire infrastructures begin to experience neglect. With no

specific campus advocate waving their flag for infrastructure needs except for facilities professionals, they are vulnerable to these unintended consequences. This is particularly acute in research and health care environments where utility reliability is crucial to their existence. A multitude of problems begin to arise with a crumbling infrastructure.

Utility outages begin to occur with greater frequency causing disruptions anywhere from minor inconveniences to major loss of research data, eroding sewer pipes begin to fail causing disruptions to the routine business of educating our students and flooding occurs in campus areas that don't drain properly. These are just a few examples of how our "invisible" infrastructures silently support the business of higher education, research and health care. When these crucial systems fail, we become exposed to increasing criticism from the campus community and our political support begins to disintegrate.

Without corrective action, this leads to a spiraling downward freefall of our budgets as resources are directed toward more politically favorable areas. This simply compounds the problems and we begin to see an erosion of quality student applications as the institution's marketability begins to suffer. Previous CFaR research projects [APPA's Center for Facilities Research] have already validated the importance of our physical facilities in the recruitment and retention of quality students.

#### GLOBAL

From the global perspective, these increasingly disruptive occurrences that result from the inability to make seemingly simple decisions can begin to have adverse effects on our surroundings in a global sense. To begin with, the impact to our sustainable environment can become significant. Indoor air quality issues have a direct impact on people's health and performance; contaminated water supplies can cause unnecessary illnesses; inappropriate storm water discharges can reduce the quality of the regional storm water quality; ineffective building systems can waste large amounts of energy and unnecessary resource consumption reduces our ability to meet future global demands. With a growing awareness and focus on sustainability issues surrounding our campuses, this creates an unacceptable risk for the institution and their ranking among their peers, not to mention the

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continuing degradation of the overall global environment.

In addition to the direct impact on our environment, eroding facilities can undermine the very research that we embody. Without reliable facilities and utilities, we are unlikely to continue receiving grants and awards for major research initiatives. After all, successful research begets more research. If we fail to attract more research grants, then the potential opportunities to make significant contributions to society that research provides, may never be fully realized. The lost opportunities in this area are immeasurable.

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he said. "The liability was that they had a mental block that we could get something a lot worse than 1993."

Emergency plans on paper are valuable tools "but rarely anything goes according to plan in an emergency," declared Brown. "People who think they have a plan to respond to something extraordinary and that it's going to go just like that are in for a rude awakening. The planning is really practice, and the practice gets your people ready for the extraordinary. You can always be assured that extraordinary things are going to happen."

"Never assume that the disaster you just had is the worst that can happen to you," agreed Guckert. "We are studying now what we should do to protect our facilities in the future and we are not assuming we have seen the worst that we will ever see in our lives."


"It's 'what do you do if...?'" said Bracy. "You never know what's going to happen."

But Guckert suggests that even the worst disasters provide a positive opportunity for facilities officers. The Iowa flood "gave us a showcase opportunity to show the institution what we were made of," he said.

As conditions worsened, daily meetings that began "modestly"

**"...planning is really practice, and the practice gets your people ready for the extraordinary. You can always be assured that extraordinary things are going to happen."—Tom Brown**

with attendance by campus officers from different facilities began also drawing in the university president, vice presidents, and senior staff in communications, public relations, and other operations. "We were the organization in charge of protecting the campus and all institutional eyes were on us and how we were responding," Guckert said.


"It was an opportunity for people to see what we were capable of doing; how we could marshal our staff and redirect it and effectively deal with all the challenges we were facing. People realized how systems and the buildings they long took for granted—and now were losing—were so vital to the operation of the campus. It gave the institution an enormous appreciation of the complexities of higher education facilities and what it really takes to keep a campus up and running." 

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Alan Dessoiff is a freelance writer based in Bethesda, MD, and a frequent contributor to *Facilities Manager*. He can be reached at [adedit@verizon.net](mailto:adedit@verizon.net).

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## CONCLUSION

Picture a world without great thinkers and inventors. If they were paralyzed by the inability to make decisions or to continue testing their ideas in the face of repeated failure, we would be missing many of the greatest inventions of all times and would be stuck in times gone by. The inability to make good decisions or take decisive action when required is an insidious enemy that lurks just below the surface of most crucial situations. Don't let it get the best of you causing some of the unintended consequences discussed above. Sometimes we need to take decisive action even when the choices are difficult, or as Nike likes to say it, "Just do it!" 

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Steve Thweatt is associate vice president for planning, design, and construction at Emory University, Atlanta, GA; he can be reached at [steven.thweatt@emory.edu](mailto:steven.thweatt@emory.edu). This is his first article for *Facilities Manager*.

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