



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Dean as Change Agent: Questioning Change

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Theological School Deans

November 29, 2017

Tags: theological education | higher education | theological school dean

Change is the constant in theological education, though it may not seem so from some vantage points. Most people in an organization desire a sense of permanence. Given the nature of the day-to-day routine, most people experience on the job, it's not difficult to appreciate they are lulled into a sense of stability and immutability in their organization. From their perspective, the constancy of the job gives a sense of continuity. Even for Faculty, the annual rhythm and cycles and the academic year can give an unwarranted sense that things change slowly from year to year. From the perspective of the dean, however, change is the constant---intended or not. Deans will confront, manage, resist, hold at bay, or instigate change every year. Most deans would welcome a single year with a minimum amount of change that can provide a "breather" from the steady stream of issues, challenges, and problems that bring about some level of change at multiple levels. Unfortunately, the nature of the job means deans will work amidst a constant swirl of change.



C. William Pollard, author of *The Soul of the Firm*, provides a perspective on change that is critical to theological education in this era. Pollard said, "Without change there is no innovation, creativity, or incentive for improvement. Those who initiate change will have a better opportunity to manage the change that is inevitable." Leaders in theological education should also take his caution to heart: "Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow."

Theological school deans, then, should embrace that change is part of their job, and accept that not everyone will like it. Deans, however, are also stewards of change in their organizations. As such, wise deans will also question change---that is, they will avail themselves of critical questions that can help them discern the purpose, necessity, and nature of the change they will lead.

Questioning Change

Here are sample perspectives that can help deans "question change":

- Do you have a legitimate rationale for the change?
- Can you rely on good data to inform the change?
- How much change do you need?
- What can help leverage the change? (trust, data, internal authority, external pressures?)
- What is the institution's capacity to absorb change?
- Has the institution navigated a similar change in the past? Did it succeed or fail? Why?
- How much risk can you absorb?
- What will you have to give up to realize the change?
- Who will you leave behind?
- What do you want to preserve?
- What will people grieve?
- What may be unintended consequences?
- What level of change is required? (Drastic or incremental?)
- What type of change is needed? (cultural, organizational, administrative, policy, technological, structural, programmatic, developmental, evolutionary, social?)
- What is your timeline for change? Is there a window of opportunity that creates urgency?
- Will your mission change as a result of the change? Does it need to?

- Will the change actually solve the problem being addressed?
- Who will commit to the change? Who is most invested in the change? In staying the same?
- Do you have the resources to make the change?
- How will you know the change is successful? What metrics will you use?
- Who will most benefit from the change?
- Who will be the most disadvantaged by the change?
- How will the change impact curriculum? Faculty? Students? Finances? The seminary culture? Administration?
- Can you see the changes through? (Will you leave office or the institution before the change is completed?)

Abigail Brenner cautioned that "Change without transition may only serve to recreate old scenarios and reinforce old patterns of behavior. For change to have a salutary effect on us, we need to learn to effectively work with it and not to run the other way when it presents itself." ("The Nature of Change," Psychology Today. May 6, 2011).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/11/dean-change-agent-questioning-change/>