

Reflective Teaching

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Paradoxes of the Dean's Leadership: What's a dean to do?

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At a gathering of theological school deans one activity had the deans share the job descriptions from each of their schools. This group of deans was from a variety of contexts: different geographic regions, various denominations, free-standing and university-embedded schools, and from large and small institutions. After comparing their documents and position descriptions the insight emerged: everyone had pretty much the same job description. As the conversation continued, however, it became clear that while everyone in the room had the same job, they each served varied functions in their institutions.



Context Matters

The important insight gained from the activity is there's a difference between role and function. Every dean plays the same role (hence, all job descriptions look similar). Context, however, determines the function the dean actually serves in the organization. Ultimately, it became clear to the deans that the question is not "What does a dean do?" (they all did pretty much the same thing), rather, the real question is, "Given the context of the school, what is a dean to do?" The answer to that question is a product of the situated context in which a school resides.

The Paradox of the Deanship

The differentiation of role from function highlights one of the paradoxes of a vocation full of paradoxes. Regardless of what the job description says, the dean's effectiveness lies more in fulfilling the necessary *functions* of the office than in the prescribed role of the job. Leadership is more a function of the system than of personal characteristics or an individual's traits. Function is determined by context, which includes a school's culture, its organizational structure and polity, the particular trajectory of its organizational development, and the institutional lifespan stage during which the dean serves. The function of the dean will also be framed by the function of the office of the school's president, which also must differentiate between role and function.

Six Leadership Paradoxes

A common paradox is the often prickly relationship between a theological school's Faculty and its dean. Setting aside the common remarks of "having gone to the dark side" when a faculty member becomes dean, there are real tensions that arise between a dean that must be a steward of the institution and a Faculty that is grounded in the important work of teaching and scholarship.

1. Faculty desire a powerful dean who can solve the school's problems, yet they are inherently suspicious of strong leadership.
2. Faculty desire a dean who is a colleague-scholar but is an administrative pragmatist.
3. Faculty desire a compassionate dean, yet need a leader who can be cunning and ruthless when necessary.
4. Faculty want a dean who is fair, but desire preferential accommodation to personal needs and wants.
5. Faculty want a powerful, self-confident dean, yet are suspicious of one who appears politically astute.
6. Faculty expect their deans to be both pragmatic and visionary; to maintain the comfort of the status quo while moving the institutions in innovation, progress, and change.

Edwin Friedman, in *A Failure of Nerve* stated, "The functioning of individuals in any institution is not determined by their nature (personality) but by their position within a relationship system, as well as by what other "cells" will permit them to do." Given these paradoxes, what is a dean to do, indeed?!

Eight Operational Paradoxes

In addition to the leadership paradoxes, deans must also navigate operational paradoxes. For example, taking a cue from Charles Edmonson's *The Paradox of Leadership*, here are some faced by deans:

1. A dean must be able to delegate responsibility while maintaining control. That's relatively easy when dealing with staff, but a challenge when it involves faculty members who function as "free agents."
2. A dean must be relentless while open-minded. To make progress the dean must maintain persistence of vision toward goals, but must be open to different strategies to get there.
3. A dean must conform to the culture in order to change it. This paradox is especially challenging for deans who come from outside the school's culture and system. A dean new to the system may need to take up to three years to understand the school's culture before substantive changes can be addressed.
4. A dean must practice pragmatic realism while maintaining optimism in the face of challenges and resistance. People in the system need a good dose of the reality of challenges and threats to the institution, but they also need hope.
5. A dean needs to promote institutional ideals without being idealistic. Ideals are important to the life of an institution, but ideals are abstract, ephemeral, and rarely realized. Hope, however, can provide the compass that gives an institution direction.
6. A dean understands that institutional learning often comes through crises and failures. Anxious organizations want guarantees and assurances from their leaders. Faculty, as a rule, are risk-averse. Yet risk is part of moving an organization forward, and risk can result in failure. However, learning from crises and failures are a part of how organizations move toward success.
7. Deans have authority without power. No matter how high up on the organizational chart the dean's office resides, it's a position with little actual power. Influence is how deans get the job done, and influence is mediated by the quality of the relationships deans are able to cultivate.
8. A dean must ensure institutional compliance with external constraints (public expectations, accreditation standards, etc.) while striving to move from managerial maintenance to adaptive changes necessary for relevance, viability, if not survival.

The Ultimate Paradox

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of being a dean is that you are most effective in both role and function when nobody notices how good you are at the job. As Michael Shinagel, former dean of continuing education and University extension at Harvard University said, "The magic of leadership was best captured by Lao Tzu: 'A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.' This is the art of leadership at its best: the art that conceals art."

Sources: Charles Edmonson, *The Paradoxes of Leadership* (1999). Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve* (2007). William Robinson, *Leading People from the Middle* (2010).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/04/paradoxes-of-the-deans-leadership-whats-a-dean-to-do/>