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Leadership Secrets of Effective Deans

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I find a lot of natural connection between the functioning of effective theological school deans and August Turak's list of "11 Leadership Secrets You've Never Heard About." Credit given for a catchy title, but these are more proven common-sense realities than "secrets." Most experienced and effective leaders know these, and, effective deans need to know these too. So, with apologies to Mr. Turak, here's a theological school dean spin on leadership secrets you MAY not have heard about.

1. Effective Deans seize the initiative. Or, as we deans like to say, "Never waste a crisis." Sometimes you have to wait for the right timing to make a change, other times you need to create the opportunity and conditions for change. Either way, more often than not, the only place initiative happens will be from the office of the dean. Practice initiative.

2. Effective Deans create their own jobs. All theological school deans have the same job (and all job descriptions read similar), but, context determines function. What does your school need of its dean, and why are YOU the dean and not another? An old adage in education is, "A school reflects its leader." Cast your own shadow and throw it long.

3. Effective Deans are coachable. There's a steep learning curve for new theological school deans. You'll be more effective and keep your sanity if you cultivate a new network of coaches, mentors, and experts. Join the ATS dean's listserve, attend the ATS CAOS meetings, apply to the Wabash Center's Colloquy for Theological School Deans, join non-theological educational networks. When you need help, ask for it, and, when you create something useful in your work, share your stuff.

4. Effective Deans anticipate. As second chair leaders deans need to take the long view. Plan your curriculum schedule five years out (no, really); sketch a six year faculty development plan (retirements, hires, sabbaticals, etc.); anticipate presidential transitions; plan for your own development in office, or, for succession. Given the nature of the job and how organizations and human nature deal with change, anticipate that every new initiative, vision, or novel idea, however appropriate, will be met with resistance.

5. Effective Deans are great communicators. This includes communicating the good and the bad, and, always telling the truth. Learn to create infographics! During times of crisis and high anxiety, you can never over-communicate.

6. Effective Deans are goal driven. Educational institutions cannot afford a "maintenance" mentality. Deans need to initiate action and push against inertia. Presidents maintain the institutional vision; Deans work to realize the goals.

7. Effective Deans show, don't tell. Demonstrate the values and ethos you want to cultivate in your seminary culture: professionalism, consideration, excellence, dependability, accountability, trustworthiness, grace, etc. One burden of leadership is, you have to set the standards, then keep them.

8. Effective Deans earn trust. Just as importantly, Deans will need to maintain trust. At points along the way you'll need to make difficult decisions that affect people at some level. As appropriate as your decision will be, some will feel betrayed. Consistently acting with integrity and telling the truth will help maintain trust, even when people choose to be mistrustful.

9. Effective Deans offer solutions. A major part of a dean's job is to solve problems--institutional, and sometimes, other people's problems. See last month's post on problem solving for more. Effective deans know to never bring a problem to the President without also bringing a solution.

10. Effective Deans are sympathetic. But remember that your primary responsibility is the welfare of the school. You can be sympathetic and still say "No," to personal requests or demands of privilege that do not serve the seminary as a whole.

11. Effective Deans are loyal. As leaders from the center, deans need to be able to send the message, "I have your back," to both President and Faculty. That's a tough one to pull off. This only happens when you are first loyal to your own calling, your own principles and values, and your own commitment to the calling of your office.

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