



You probably should not be a dean if...

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Deans in theological schools tend to come from the Faculty, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's a question of who is most willing to serve (or, who missed the meeting when the vote was taken!). Sometimes it's a decision based of budget constraints. Sometimes it's political. More often than not, it is a well-intentioned and properly motivated response to the need of the school for someone to serve in that capacity. Good intentions and high ideals are a good start, but, sadly, not sufficient to meet the demands of the job and function of the deanship.

If you, or a colleague, are in the position of deciding whether or not to answer the call to step into the deanship, here's a short list of things to consider when deciding. You probably should not be a dean . . .

If you don't like meetings. Deans lead from the center of the organization. As such, you'll occupy a place in the organization that is connected to just about every other corner of the organization. That will necessitate more meetings than you thought could possibly be scheduled any given week, with committees, groups, students, faculty, vendors, staff, and anyone who wants to make a claim on your time and favor. You can resolve to reduce your attendance at meetings, but the fact is the need for the presence of the dean will not likely allow for much reduction in this activity.

If you have a low tolerance for pain and loneliness. While deans occupy the second chair

position in the organization, they still have a key leadership role to play. Anyone who occupies a position of leadership in an organization will deal with pain and loneliness inherent to leadership. Be prepared to weather personal attacks, having your motives questioned, accused of being power-hungry and manipulative, playing favorites, having "gone to the dark side" and any number of other accusations. This has less to do with you and more to do with the office you occupy, but, you'll feel the pain nevertheless.

If you need to be liked. When a professor friend at another school learned that I was about to become dean, he said, "Now the faculty won't like you." To which I responded, "They don't like me now, so that's not a problem." Schools need their deans to be effective, but not necessarily, and not always, liked. Deans are administrators and managers whose primary responsibility of stewardship is the welfare of the institutions. Deans will never be able to make decisions that will make everyone happy.

If you cannot choose vision and the welfare of the institution over personal relationships or alliances. When a faculty member occupies the office of dean, she or he "shifts" position in the system. That includes a shift in how one relates to all other persons in the organization. The function of the dean calls for a commitment to the welfare and advance of the organization--its mission, health, effectiveness, and relevance--over other concerns that may tip to the welfare of individuals at the expense of the organization. Sometimes, deans have to say "No," to friends, fully realizing the personal cost to both, or, to the relationship.

If you are not willing to learn a new professional field. Theological schools are firmly planted in the field of higher education. Therefore, deans cannot just be scholars in theological disciplines, they must be competent educational leaders. That means becoming competent in educational administration, educational leadership, educational supervision, educational assessment, and educational planning.

If you are not willing to speak the truth, always. As leaders from the center, deans often have the capacity, and obligation, to "see things as they are." Deans are pragmatists and realists who are not well-served by wishful thinking. One prophetic function of theological school deans is to speak the truth, to the President, to trustees, to faculty, and to students.

If you cannot discern between reactivity and sabotage. Deans are agents of change in their organizations. While the phrase "People don't like change," if oft-repeated, we consistently underestimate just how hard change is for people. Whenever the dean initiates change, from policy to program to personnel, the first response is reactivity. That's normal and to be expected, and therefore, does not really require a response. But, deans need to discern when

reactivity rises to the level of sabotage--that calls for action and response.

If you are prone to focus on people's feelings over holding them accountable. Deans build the health of their organization by introducing and maintaining accountability in the organization. Holding people accountable goes hand in hand with giving people responsibility. Holding someone accountable for their responsibility does not feel good to anyone, but it is necessary. Focusing on (unpleasant) feelings is beside the point.

If you cannot assess, measure, evaluate, and judge. Deans must engage in quality control in order to ensure the integrity of the organization. That's what assessment is all about: "Are we doing what we say we are doing, and how well?" Assessment and evaluation often call for making a judgment--it's helpful to confess that you cannot lead without judging.

If you aren't a problem-solver. There will be seasons when half your days will involve solving other people's problems. The other half will involve solving institutional problems. The problems never end, but effective deans understand that it's so much about the problems, or how many, as much as how you respond and deal with them. Theological schools are institutions of a kind--they all have the same problems, but, each dean must solve the problems of her or his school.

If you cannot be ruthless about boundaries. While it is true that, to some extent, for the dean "Everything is my business," it is also true that not everything is his or her responsibility. Deans must also ensure that institutional boundaries are respected, among and between administration, trustees, staff, employees, students.

So, do you still want to be a dean? Good! Few things will challenge you more in your personal and professional growth. Join the club!

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