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The Dean and Change: Willfulness or Necessity?

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Theological school deans serve in the capacity of institutional change agents. By virtue of leading from the center, deans bring about change through vision, influence, and, by pushing against inertia. As a person who leads from the center, theological school deans see beyond the horizon (when others may not) and strategize how to move an organization from here to there. Implementing strategic plans for change is one thing, and, as a form of technical change, relatively easy. Dealing with the "messy human factor" of resistance to change, entrenchment, reactivity, and outright sabotage related to change, is another.

One fundamental rule is that willfulness is what does the harm in relationship systems, from families to corporations. The best of intentions can become corrupt when they are forced upon others through willfulness. My theological interpretation of willfulness is that it is a form of idolatry. Willfulness is a desire to make others in our own image. It robs people of freedom, choice, and agency.

So, deans as leaders need to bring about change, but they can't be willful about it. Doing the necessary for the good of the organization often means making decisions others do not agree with--yet, the dean must act and bring about the changes necessary to move the seminary forward or move it toward health. In complex systems like a theological school, bringing about change means getting OTHER people to change--their perspectives, their practices, their behaviors, etc.

The question of discernment for a theological school dean becomes, "What is the difference

between being willful and doing what is necessary?"

Here are four basic questions of discernment that can help answer the question, is this willful, or necessary?

Is this about me, or is it about the organization?

Is this an exertion of leadership through influence or through power?

Is the appeal to the higher or the baser motivations in those who need to change?

Is this a personal predilection, or a matter related to the seminary's mission and corporate values?

Below are two lists that can help identify the willful from the necessary:

Characteristics of Willfulness in the Leader

- A stance of power or an appeal to authority when pushing for change
- An unwillingness to accept opposing viewpoints
- An uncritical dismissal of the validity of other viewpoints
- A lack of appreciation of the impact of a decision on others
- An insistence on conformity
- Pushing for a decision through ultimatums or unnecessary deadlines
- Insisting on only one way to do things
- Seeking ways to silence opposing viewpoints
- Withholding information
- Exaggerating consequences of a decision
- Engaging in seduction tactics to win over people
- Triangling others into the issue not involved in the matter
- Politicizing the change and creating coalitions
- Making claims based on wishful thinking, anecdotes, or personal experience rather than study.

Characteristics of Necessary Change

- The decision is for the welfare of the institution, its advancement and health
- The decision benefits the majority of persons in the institution, not just a few
- The decision advances the mission of the institution
- The decision is ethical and does not violate standards or regulations

- The decision is informed by study and responsible interpretation of data
- The decision is given to the persons or group that must take responsibility for its implementation.

For theological school deans, change is the constant. Some changes need to be initiated or implemented by the dean, but all institutional changes involve many others. Bringing about changes is part of the job, but deans do well, and serve their institutions and its members best, when they are able to avoid willfulness and can discern which changes are necessary, and, when.

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