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The Dean as an agent of change

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At a recent conference on leadership I was again struck by how the level of energy (anxiety?) in the room increased when the topic focused on change. This is natural, of course, since one of the critical functions of leaders, including deans, is to bring about positive change on several levels. In fact, it is

likely that a new dean will begin her or his term of office with a mandate to make changes in the system----notwithstanding that any attempts of consequence to do so on his or her part of the leader will likely meet with resistance if not outright sabotage.

The resistance to change is natural in that the nature of emotional process in any system includes the force of homeostasis, and homeostatis resists change at the most fundamental levels: those that upset the balance of dynamics that have established patterns of relationships, structures of power, and those systemic structures and processes that inform identity (like culture and practices).

It can be helpful for theological school deans to not only understand the nature of change in organizations, but to discern the type of change needed during a particular stage in the life of the theological school. Deans are well served to understand the nuances in understanding the types and levels of change necessary and possible. An important question for the dean is, "what kind of change am I trying to bring about in my school at this time?" The list below depicts different kinds of change according to their level from easy to bring about to harder to

achieve. From top to bottom these levels of change take a short time to bring about (e.g., programmatic) to a long time to realize (e.g., cultural and evolutionary). The lower on the list the type of change the more it is a type of "fundamental" or "adaptive" change.
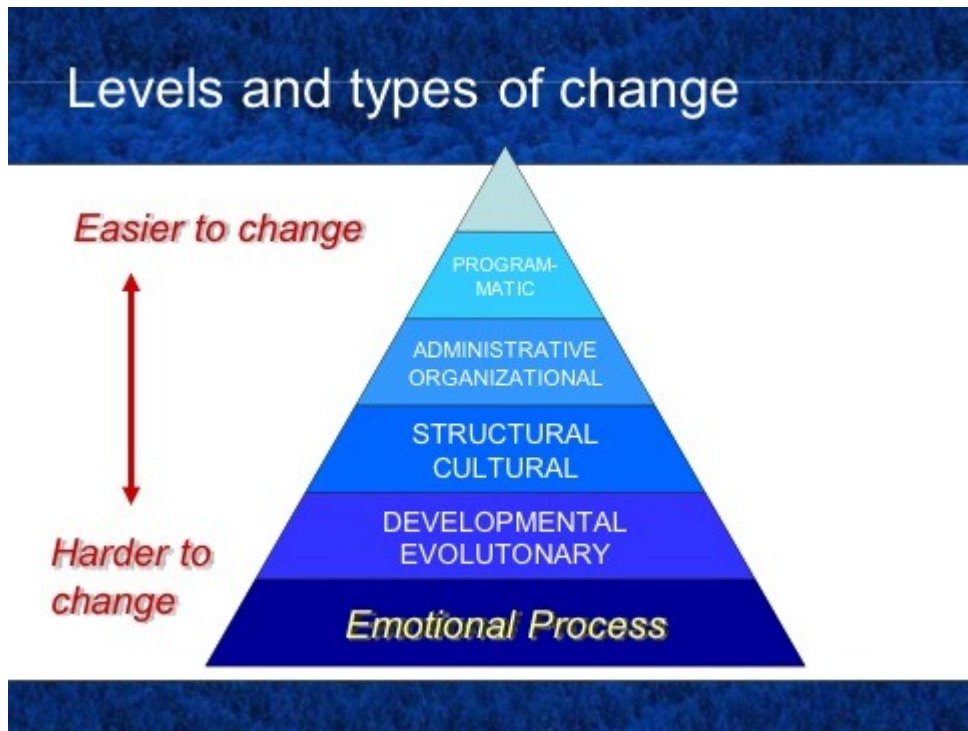
 Change at any level invites anxiety if not reactivity. However, change at the more fundamental level often is perceived as threat, so deans should expect a higher level of reactivity and resistance to the change. Depending on the resilience of the system, change at any level may bring a minimal or a great deal of anxiety and reactivity. Systems with a low tolerance for change (like seminaries) can experience major crises with attempts at even benign programmatic changes.

Few of us remain in the office of the dean long enough to bring about change at the more essential levels, those that impact developmental or evolutionary change, which shifts the emotional process in the system, including homeostasis. The typical tenure of most deans is five to seven years. This has dire implications for the health and vitality of seminaries living in a current age of swift technical changes, drastic cultural changes, and multiple external stressors. My hunch is that the theological schools that will service and thrive over the course of the next two decades are those who can be resilient enough to embrace change at the more fundamental levels while maintaining their core mission. The role of the dean as an agent of change will be a critical factor in this.

Deans, who lead from the center, need to discern the right kind of change needed for right time. To mistake programmatic change for developmental change is a potentially costly blunder. To force organizational change in an attempt to bring about cultural change is

ineffective.

 Effective deans know the type of change they need to bring about, and they understand the processes necessary to realize those changes, including, dealing with resistance and sabotage. Of course, seasoned deans also know not expect to hear, "Thank you for all these changes you are making around here."

Questions:

What level of change are you currently trying to bring about in your school?

How do you deal with resistance to change?

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2012/02/the-dean-as-an-agent-of-change/