

Three Principles of Effective Deaning

by Kent D. Syverud

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Most deans today are viewed as ineffective by most of their constituencies, which include the faculty, the students, the alumni, the central administration, the staff, the professional community, and the regulators of the school. This is a harsh observation, but a true one, and it does not necessarily reflect badly on deans. Few human beings could seem effective to all these varied constituencies, with their often-conflicting goals and values.

Yet some deans pull it off. As a relatively new dean who at times aspires to join that select number, I have spent some time observing effective deans, in law schools and in other disciplines. Three principles suggest themselves from observation of effective deans:

I. An effective dean acts on the assumption that everyone associated with the school feels underappreciated at all times.

II. An effective dean recognizes that most of the progress of the school will come from a very small number of key steps, rather than from the hundreds of less important matters that nevertheless require the dean's attention.

III. An effective dean keeps his or her own school, and his or her own role, in appropriately humble perspective.

I Acting on the Assumption that Everyone Feels Underappreciated at All Times

I once attended a glamorous dinner, at the residence of a university president, to honor a professor who was retiring. The food was excellent, the speeches and tributes moving, and the recognition of a life's work impressive. But the professor, enjoying the

moment, still confessed to me his deepest reaction: fury at having been denied a summer grant by an administrator more than a decade before. Academic institutions, law schools included, inspire long memories and injured egos more than most other workplaces.

An effective dean, confronting this reality, learns never to assume that any constituent feels appreciated and valued in his or her work for the school. Instead, the dean praises and acknowledges work of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and administrators all the time, on every occasion, and constantly creates new occasions to celebrate the people of the school.

There is a corollary to the principle that a dean will never go wrong by assuming someone he or she is working with feels underappreciated: A dean must exercise extraordinary discretion in addressing those things about his or her colleagues, students, administrators, alumni, and staff that he or she does not appreciate. A negative comment from the dean about any aspect of a person's work will almost always have greater impact, and a wider audience, than the dean intended. For the student, a criticism in class from the dean will be perceived as more troubling; for a faculty member, it will be assumed that the comment is directly tied to next year's salary increase; for an administrator, it will produce unintended sleepless nights. This negative effect will be greatly magnified whenever the criticism is received secondhand. That makes things lonely for the dean. Frustrations with the work of colleagues or students must be kept private, communicated only directly to the colleague concerned, and then with care and in context. Confidants must be very few and very discreet, and preferably family members.

II Key Steps to Advance the School

Effective deans devote most of their effort to the very few major things that make a school get better. At most law schools at the beginning of this century, that means hiring extraordinary faculty and administrators, obtaining major gifts, securing a budget that assures institutional health, and creating an environment in which students and faculty can thrive better than at competing schools. If one looks to any law school over the past 50 years and honestly appraises what has made it thrive or drift, most of the success or failure of the school will result from success or failure on these four things. Test this against your institutional memory of your own school: Odds are great that the key steps were a handful of faculty or administrators who came or left, major gifts or budgeting support that enabled progress or programs, and development of an institutional strategy superior to those of competitors. These are the priorities on which deans should spend their time.

None of these priorities will surprise most deans. What is surprising is how difficult it is to spend much time working on them.

How do effective deans keep their attention on the highest priorities for advancing the school? My observation

suggests that each dean is unique. Some are meticulous schedulers and prioritizers who insist upon a certain number of donor contacts each week and who consciously choose to neglect other administrative issues in the pursuit of a key faculty recruit or a state legislator. Others are masters at finding the person who is their complement on the faculty or in the administration—the person who can selflessly, and in the dean's name, take care of the manifold important issues that nevertheless might otherwise preclude the dean's careful attention to the key steps. Still others are just lucky; they have the right personality and personal interest at the key moment, so that they choose to spend most of their time on what, in retrospect, turns out to have been a transforming opportunity. Each dean needs to find his or her own way here. My point is simply that most deans will fail if they do not have a strategy for saving the bulk of their effort for the institutional needs that really matter.

III A Humble Perspective on School and Self

No dean is Moses. Law schools are remarkably stable, long-lived institutions that change slowly and, often as not, are the product of the efforts of many deans and their

colleagues, over many lifetimes. Few constituents are impressed by, or willing to sacrifice for, a dean who manifests the belief that he or she is the one most responsible for the accomplishments of the institution. An effective

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dean realizes and communicates an understanding that his or her role is most often that of facilitating the triumphs of others—of colleagues, alumni, students, and staff. The dean's is the role of steward rather than prophet, most of the time.

When a dean is appropriately humble about the school's role within the university, and about his or her own role as dean, he or she can credibly be boastful and exuberant about the vision for the school and the importance of supporting it. Effective deans are boastful and exuberant in this way, and their enthusiasm is attractive and contagious. ♦