

## TOP TEN LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED FROM BEING DEAN DURING COVID-19

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IT feels presumptuous to write an essay about leadership lessons from the time of COVID-19. I spent more than a little time during this period feeling anxious, stressed, and insecure. But I believe that as leaders we have both an obligation and opportunity for continual improvement and self-assessment. And while I hope we will not see another global pandemic in my lifetime, there will certainly be other emergencies.<sup>1</sup> I hope that these reflections may help provide some guidance to future deans, during some inevitable future emergency or urgent situation. (And like most of us, I find the opportunity to do some writing somewhat cathartic.)

To put this in context, this essay is solely about Spring of 2020. As I sit here now, it is easier to recognize that in many ways, that was the least complicated part of the last eight months. Summer and Fall of 2020 brought important conversations about racial justice, social justice, as well as the continued educational and financial strain of the continued presence of COVID-19 in all our lives. These are crucial issues for all of legal education, and they raise important challenges and opportunities that are mostly not reflected below. Rather, I focus here on the on the early set of decisions around the pandemic, as well as the beginnings of our recovery.

To put things in context, as the law school of Loyola Marymount University, we are geographically distinct – having our campus in downtown Los Angeles, while the larger University campus is located across town, close to Los Angeles International Airport, as well as a Playa Vista campus in the heart of Silicon Beach.

With that preface, here are my top ten leadership lessons and observations:

### *1. Listen to the right voices.*

I tend to not be a zombie apocalypse person. Despite living in Southern California, our home earthquake kit is never what it should be. Near the end of February, there were members of our community suggesting COVID-19 was going

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1. As I am putting the finishing touches on editing this piece, it is at a moment when COVID cases are climbing across the country. So we may only be at inning 4 or 5 of a 9-inning game.

to be more serious than, at that point, most of us were thinking. We did what institutions of higher education do – we formed a working group! We brought together key faculty and staff to make sure our continuity of operations plan was what it needed to be.

As we approached the first week of March, the messages from community members increased in volume and intensity. At this point, in my most honest reflection, I still thought members of our community who were urging the most immediate and dramatic action might be overreacting. For me, a tipping point was the weekend of March 7<sup>th</sup>, right before our students were scheduled to return from Spring Break. Several of our Associate Deans had caucused and, after reflection, believed that we might want to take some additional action. They were right, and I would have been wrong. My only success was listening to their ideas and concerns and allowing it to shift my thinking.

This also required consulting with the University, as we were a week ahead of them in the academic calendar and were therefore facing more immediate decisions. Eventually, we settled on a plan and built consensus. We cancelled classes Monday and Tuesday after Spring Break to avoid bringing students back on campus and create the space for a three day “test” of virtual readiness on Wednesday through Friday. By midweek, it was clearer that we would not be returning to campus anytime soon.

There were also other important voices during these crucial few weeks, thanks in large part to work done before the crisis. I felt grateful that I had invested in creating the right network that I could call on, for varying advice, feedback, or emotional support. For me, this included key alumni, but also people completely outside our law school community, like fellow Deans and outside business leaders.

## 2. *Listen to your inner voice.*

Faced with so much uncertainty, and in a job where you are used to getting second-guessed from every angle, this is not easy. We all have self-doubt, and those moments of truly believing that there is not a magical answer that someone else would see clearly, are rare, at least for me. A primary tool I use to help me make decisions is gather information from different sources – usually from colleagues in my inner circle, but also, ideally, those outside of it.

During the earlier days of the pandemic, there was a greater intensity of decisions, and with seemingly more important consequences, than I was used to. And whether it was the decision to close the law school campus in advance of a decision from the University, or the decision to adopt a credit-no credit grading system for Spring 2020, there were heartfelt and persuasive views on both sides.

I had to realize that for these decisions (and so many others) there was not necessarily a right or wrong decision – just the best decision I could make. And to do that, I found I really needed to work hard, after gathering inputs, to tune out the world, and think as deeply as I could about what I ultimately thought was right. (I tended to do this while going for a run or walk...).

3. *Articulate core values.*

Our team needed to be able to create a set of principles to help guide some of the decisions we were making, and as a stress test for whether a potential decision could be explained in terms of our core values. I also found that it resonated with our community as a rallying point to help demonstrate our commitment to a certain set of ideals.

For us, the core values were three-fold: (1) protecting, to the greatest extent possible, the health and safety of everyone in our community; (2) continuing continuity of instruction; and (3) realizing the extent to which the pandemic was disrupting the personal and professional lives of everyone in our community and that it did not impact everyone equally – the more vulnerable members of our community were impacted more.

We reiterated these principles on every important communication to our community. And our principles drove outcomes. For example, the third factor helped guide us to the credit-no credit decision. It seemed to violate basic principles of fairness that our students' ability to achieve desired grades would likely depend in significant part on (way more than is even typical and/or accepted) their level of disruption during the pandemic.

4. *When there is no playbook or precedent for decisions that need to be made, assess quickly who will make them and the process by which they will be made.*

There were many of decisions in Spring 2020 for which there was really no precedent – How to close campus; for whom to close campus; attendance policies; scholarship determinations; clinic operations; grading; exam format, just to name a few. Our faculty handbook and governance procedures had no emergency clauses. In a community committed to faculty governance, as well as operating within a greater University structure, this presented challenges. For each of these, and others, our leadership team needed to assess who was actually empowered to make what decision.

There was no secret sauce here. For decisions that we felt there was no realistic process or mechanism for a faculty vote, we tried to build real time feedback loops to at least communicate that this was a decision for which there was no other alternative. We also tried to solicit what input and support was possible on the mechanics of the decision itself. For me, that included our COVID-19 Response Team (which included both faculty and staff), Associate Deans, the Dean's Advisory Group (which is an elected group of faculty members), dialogues with our student leaders, as well as constant communication with University leadership.

One item on our collective to-do list: come up with emergency provisions in faculty handbooks and other guiding documents.

5. *On impossible decisions, gather input as possible, striking right balance of framing expectations.*

In Spring 2020, there were many decisions where it was impossible to make everyone happy. Even worse, there were decisions where, when the issue was finally resolved, those on various sides could even be characterized as winners and losers. The grading issue was one – some students wanted to retain our traditional grading system, feeling that grades were important for their future employment prospects. Others did not, believing that given the disruption in their lives, it was impossible to administer fair evaluations and assessments.

On this particular one, I followed the lead of a Dean at another institution who I admire greatly. First, our leadership team decided that this was probably a decision that I, as Dean, was ultimately responsible for. As per above, we solicited feedback from the Dean's Advisory Committee, as well as University leadership (given that our decision here was running on parallel track to important University conversations, and would have financial impacts), both explaining that a decision had to be made and I would ultimately make it.

I then communicated to the students, via e-mail, that I would make this decision, framing the decision parameters. I invited students to submit comments in writing, anonymous or not, and pledged to read every one. I received over 700 comments, ranging in length and intensity. As a teacher, I was gratified to see how well our students advocated for their positions. As a human being, I was moved to see how many of our students advocated, in heartfelt and persuasive ways, for the interests of others.

During this period, we also held several faculty meetings, both working through the decision-making parameters, but also the actual decision. Faculty colleagues were incredibly thoughtful in providing feedback for both, but ultimately affirming that they were supportive of the administration and our decision.

6. *Leverage relationships.*

In Spring 2020, I was in my fourth year as Dean. I was struck by how I found myself leveraging every bit of goodwill and trust that had been established up to that point in my tenure. This was true for all constituencies – University leadership, faculty, staff, alumni, and even students. Time and bandwidth for everyone was limited – being able to move quickly, with baseline levels of commonality, was crucial.

I cannot imagine being a relatively new Dean in this period. Particularly on our internal leadership team, we were forced to operate with more speed, built on awareness and trust, than ever before. We had to rely on each other in ways we had not before. We weren't perfect (and most, if not all, mistakes were mine). But it became apparent that every vulnerability that existed on any leadership team would be amplified given the intensity of the decision-making and implementation process.

7. *Stay at 30,000 feet.*

One wise piece of advice I received when becoming Dean was to work very hard to always see the big picture, and “stay at 30,000 feet.” The idea is that if you are not in that space, it is likely no one else is. In the best of times, I have found this hard to do. In the midst of an evolving global pandemic, trying to figure out what needs to happen day-by-day, it became even more challenging.

This is something I really struggled with. But I know that any moment I broke away, trying to reflect on how these decisions related to our values as an institution, and how we could and should position ourselves for future success, was time well spent. The best tool I had to force myself to do this was engage in conversation with individuals I respect, who have been professionally successful in fields completely outside of legal or even higher education. I found that perspective, disconnected from the reality of daily triage, enormously valuable.

8. *Recognize that pathways to you are more important than they have ever been.*

I tend to be someone that underestimates the nature of the symbolic importance of our roles as Dean. But at a moment where so much appears uncertain, it is so important for all constituencies – faculty, students, staff, alumni, and University leadership – to have access to at least voice views and concerns in real-time. I found the sheer demand on time and emotional energy this takes a real challenge. And the way I generally like to make this happen – just walking around campus and talking to people – was not available. But I resolved to create immediate feedback loops for each of these constituencies, often times just listening, many times being honest that I did not yet have complete answers. This took place primarily in Zoom town halls, coffee chats, Happy Hours, but also through one-on-one Zoom chats, e-mails, and phone calls with anyone who wanted to raise an issue or concern.

9. *Communicate, communicate, communicate.*

On important issues, no one likes to feel like they were not “in the room where it happened.” Yet the reality is that the normal governance and democratic procedures did not work perfectly in the time-pressured Spring of 2020. Finding constant, new, and productive ways to communicate to students, faculty, staff, and alumni was a recurring challenge. It made me wish that more regular communication channels that could be leveraged had been established before, which gave us something to work on moving forward.

10. *Be kind to yourself.*

This one is and remains hard. In my experience, most Deans truly love their institutions, work hard on behalf of them, judging themselves – often harshly – by how well they did. Facing situations and decisions that of necessity will invite criticism exacerbates what may be preexisting tendencies to dwell and obsess over

our least proud moments. I made numerous mistakes during this period, some of which were harder to turn the page on than others. But, at the end of the day, I am appreciative of the support of my colleagues, and beyond grateful for a strong family unit, including a supportive spouse and three children who, for the most part, are young enough that they care way less about Dad's work than if he is there to play with and support them.