

DEANING AND LEADERSHIP—KEEPING IN STEP, KEEPING IT SIMPLE¹

*Colonel Gregory O. Block**

I. INTRODUCTION

IT has been an incredible privilege to serve as Dean of The Army Judge Advocate General's School (JAG School).² With a student population made up entirely of graduates of ABA-accredited law schools, the JAG School focuses on providing initial and continuing legal education programs, including an LL.M. in Military Law, to uniformed lawyers dedicated to conforming military operations to the rule of law. The JAG School is not a traditional law school; for military personnel, it is a crime to not come to class or to conspire to mutiny against the dean. In spite of these differences, my time working with deans of ABA-accredited law schools at a variety of ABA, AALS, and other conferences and symposia has reinforced my perception that inspired and informed leadership is a formula for success common to all law schools. In the case of the JAG School, the emphasis on leadership is not surprising. Leadership is a recognized and integral part of military professionalism and value systems. Leadership is similarly important in traditional law schools. In fact, I have repeatedly observed deans of ABA law schools upholding the finest traditions of military leadership.

The modest thoughts that follow offer my personal and informal perspective on getting the most out of what is common to all law school environments, in or

1. I owe a great debt to the larger-than-life leaders, many of them dynamic and loud, whom I have worked for and with in almost thirty years of uniformed service. Staying sensitive to and in sync with those around you—keeping in step, communicating clearly and directly, and keeping it simple (in military acronym speak “K.I.S.S.” or “Keep it Simple Stupid”)—are critical and clearly universal leadership themes.

* U.S. Army; Dean of The Judge Advocate General's School from 2005–2008. Currently serving as the Director of the Army's Legal Center at The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School. Previous assignments include Senior Legal Advisor, 25th Infantry Division, Hawaii and Afghanistan; 7th Army, Federal Republic of Germany; NATO, Bosnia; Fort Meade, Maryland; 8th Army, South Korea; and Professor of Administrative and Civil Law, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center & School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

2. For more information about The Judge Advocate General's School (JAG School), see The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center & School, <https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/8525736A005BC8F9> (last visited Jan. 16, 2009). The JAG School also provides a monthly publication, *ARMY LAW.*, available at <https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/JAGCNETInternet/Homepages/AC/ArmyLawyer.nsf/AL?>, and a law review, *MIL. L. REV.*, available at [https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/JAGCNETInternet/Homepages/AC/MilitaryLawReview.nsf/MLRDIsplay?](https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/JAGCNETInternet/Homepages/AC/MilitaryLawReview.nsf/MLRDisplay?).

out of the military arena.³ My reflections are based on what I have learned about being a dean from recent experience, from law school colleagues, and from lessons in leadership drawn from almost thirty years of active service in the Army. At the outset, I will provide context for these thoughts with what might be termed a thesis or first principle, including some facts and questions that I believe are relevant, exciting, and possibly daunting, for all deans.

II. YOU MAY BE IN CHARGE, BUT NINETY-EIGHT PERCENT OF WHAT HAPPENS IS GOING TO BE ACCOMPLISHED WHEN YOU ARE NOT AROUND

To be a law school dean in America implicitly means being surrounded by talented, brilliant people. It is difficult to imagine any brain trust more impressive than a law school faculty. And plainly law students—exceptional, smart, and motivated—are some of the best and brightest to be found in any of our nation's classrooms. Bringing faculty and students together in the classroom is the study of law, a discipline of incredible breadth and importance. With a support team composed of like-minded subordinate deans and staff, and with the active encouragement of alumni and boards/trustees/presidents, the conditions for a dean's success and achievement seemingly couldn't be better, and yet

The work of an educational institution includes teaching, motivating, and inspiring students, as well as representing the institution through speaking engagements, publications, and similar activities. In my experience, there comes a point when leaders of most complex organizations, whether based in law or not, come to see that a substantial majority of the institution's work is being done without his or her direct supervision or knowledge. The resultant challenges and questions are far more obvious than the solutions. One of the first of those questions is how can a dean ensure that students are treated by staff and faculty in accordance with institutional values? Similarly, how can a dean ensure that the curriculum is, and remains, dynamic and evolving? How can a dean motivate the faculty—the foundation for all law schools—to achieve greatness in ways that develop them personally while simultaneously advancing the goals of the institution? Finally, how can a dean do all these things in a way that creates and maintains momentum, whether he or she is directly involved or not? The answer to all of these questions is leadership, and specifically strategic leadership.

III. SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP IN MOST COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS IS STRATEGIC—THE KEY TO SUCCESS IS NOT DEFINING THE METHOD, BUT SHAPING THE EFFORT

The typical law school dean, who is surrounded by many kinds of excellence, needs to accept the obvious: the faculty generally does not need him or her to tell them how to accomplish their most essential tasks. Rather, a dean's role is much more difficult and is essential to bringing unity and coherence to the disparate work of many. The dean has to steer and influence others' actions and

3. And if I can do this without lapsing into military jargon, I'll declare "mission accomplished."

efforts, and must do so by means of deliberate guidance and decision-making that pervades the way the school operates, regardless of whether or not he or she is present. Understanding what a dean must do is not the same as doing it. Instead, deans must find practical ways to approach strategic leadership and to shape organizational efforts. The following suggestions are my nominations.

A. *Provide Strategic Direction and Establish Left and Right Boundaries,⁴ Then Get out of the Way*

In military parlance, this refers to setting an azimuth or direction⁵ for the troops to follow and then empowering them to act. Operating from a strategic level, a military commander might establish an overarching mission of defeating a defined enemy or securing a strategic objective, and then leave subordinate leaders to sort out the details of how the mission will be accomplished.⁶ In a similar vein, a law school dean might establish an objective such as expanding student clinical opportunities or globalizing curriculum. A dean who establishes such goals should establish reasonable parameters (i.e., boundaries) to guide planning and execution without explicitly spelling out how to get from one point to the next.

B. *Prepare Faculty and Students to Achieve Greatness, and Settle for Nothing Less*

I believe that outstanding leadership is less an innate talent than an ability that can be developed. This principle is true whether it involves the profession of arms⁷ or the legal academy. Many faculty and students are highly motivated but are not fully prepared to succeed. Senior leaders, such as deans, are uniquely responsible for such preparation and must develop the leadership necessary to create success.

Tools to help set the conditions necessary for success are all around us; these include AALS New Faculty Training, on-line seminars and podcasts, educational consultants, and peer and cohort partnerships. You name it and the likelihood is that the tools are out there, ready to be found and used, but these tools typically come *at a cost*. Generating support for acquiring and using such

4. This, of course, assumes that the dean has had the opportunity to develop a strategy and vision; a subject and process significant enough for its own article.

5. See U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, MAP READING AND LAND NAVIGATION (FM NO. 3-25.26) § 6.3 (2005) ("The azimuth is the most common military method to express direction."). The azimuth is the "horizontal angle measured clockwise from a north baseline." *Id.*

6. The military calls guidance of this nature "Mission Orders." Posting of Tom Magness to Leader Business, <http://leaderbusiness.blogspot.com/search/label/mission%20orders> (Feb. 3, 2008, 07:45 EST). The Mission Orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff to General Eisenhower during World War II are a classic example. The orders provided, "Enter the continent of Europe, and undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces." *Id.*

7. See generally U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, TRAINING THE FORCE (FM 7.0) ¶¶ 3-21 to 3-25 (2008) (detailing U.S. Army's leadership and development training model).

tools might present challenges and resourcing this effort will not happen without planning and budgeting.

C. Even the Most Highly Motivated Faculty and Students Need Support

Experienced leaders appreciate that many related and synchronized efforts are needed to make complex organizations successful. This is certainly true with regard to educational institutions. One has but to imagine an educational institution where faculty receive no administrative or logistical support, individual faculty must procure supplies as obvious and fundamental as paper and computers, visual information support is nonexistent, or library services and resources are allowed to lapse. Unfortunately, great student and faculty support does not just happen. It comes at a cost and requires planning, resourcing, and continuous commitment.

D. Provide Students and Faculty a Sounding Board

To become truly synchronized, students, faculty, and deans need an opportunity and a mechanism to give and receive feedback. We typically devote a great deal of energy to the assessment process, and it is easy to become preoccupied with student assessments and grading without fully considering ways to provide faculty and staff with an analogous voice. Educational leaders will likely appreciate that soliciting and implementing input on strategic goals, vision, and decision-making is about creating a culture of constructive feedback and empowering subordinates with a voice in their own affairs. An open dialogue regarding curriculum, guest lectures, and special events is essential. Something as simple as an incentivized suggestion program, with implemented decisions tied to monetary or other forms of recognition, can create interest and excitement in ideas that reinforce strategic direction.

E. Check, and Then Check Again

If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well and that means progress needs to be monitored or “checked” no matter the person’s background. The mentality of “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” caters to a busy leader’s many distractions but generally ignores the importance of checking and staying focused on strategic items of interest. Relating this back to the importance of setting an azimuth to achieving strategic objectives, the point of emphasis is simply that checking is the means by which we continually verify that we are still on the set azimuth.

The ways in which progress and direction can be checked are virtually limitless. It might be as simple as monitoring student feedback or as complicated and resource-intensive as bringing in outside consultants. It might even be a distinct function delegated to a specific individual. No matter how checking is accomplished, it is almost certain that it will not happen effectively without the strategic leader’s input and active involvement.

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F. Use Accomplishments to Motivate and Guide the Organization

Whether for competitive rankings, fundraising, or to justify its tiny part of an enormous federal budget as in the case of the JAG School, leaders must tell their organizational story. This story must include not only what is happening today, but what they envision for the organization tomorrow. The impressive literature and brochures created by law schools across the country illustrate that one of the best ways to tell a story is through the accomplishments and overall excellence of faculty, students, staff, and alumni. All of us appreciate recognition, and these products clearly make a tremendous impact both on those they feature and those who hold the featured individuals dear. Beyond reinforcing excellence, these same products also can elevate and focus organizational initiatives that reinforce strategic vision and move an organization closer to organizational goals.

G. The Most Important Individual Efforts Are Those that Build and Strengthen Your Team

Whether in the military or not, experience shows that while the contributions of individuals can be of vast significance, an organization really starts to achieve greatness disproportionate to its size when its members work as a team. If the sum is not greater than its component parts, the organization is missing great opportunity. Functioning teams not only provide collective motivation that builds momentum, they also provide support where the organization might not have even anticipated a need, and teams can exist and make contributions at all levels of an organization.

IV. HARD WORK WILL USUALLY GET YOU SOMEWHERE; IT MAY NOT,
HOWEVER, GET YOU WHERE YOU INTENDED TO GO

No focus on strategic leadership would be complete without some discussion about making sure time is available to accomplish strategic goals. It comes as no surprise that time management is the greatest concern of most law school deans, as it certainly is for most military leaders. The leader who cannot effectively allocate time is probably risking the organization's strategic vision. This is particularly true for those innumerable jobs in which a seemingly endless series of interruptions fills every minute. Below are a few additional thoughts pertaining to the critical task of making time for and staying focused on the strategic vision.

A. Organizational Leaders Must Maintain a Distinction between Current Operations and Future Strategic Operations

Day-to-day pressures on senior leaders are overwhelmingly operational and tend to inhibit strategic action. Leaders who respond to this pressure will often find themselves like the tail on a dog—constantly in motion, but never in control. Even a part-time approach to strategic operations is likely to be insufficient—one

may work hard to build something without being quite sure what form it will take. At the end of the day, creating strategic vision and maintaining momentum towards achieving it (i.e., staying on azimuth) is hard work that demands a substantial commitment of a leader's time. The ability to allocate the time necessary to pursue and realize strategic aims is arguably what most distinguishes good leaders from strategic leaders.

B. Agility Can Be a Great Equalizer

It is almost impossible to anticipate everything that will affect any given undertaking. Leaders who over-involve themselves in the minutiae of executing a strategic plan can miss invaluable opportunities. By viewing surroundings in the constant light of an organizational vision, unanticipated complications can be avoided, minor adjustments can be made, and, best of all, some low-hanging fruit can be harvested or may even fall into our hands!

C. Capture Consistency When It Matters

Activities of the organization that are important and recurring should be handled consistently and should not become projects that require senior leader involvement. Also, operational-level decisions of minimal precedential value (for example, a decision on paper supply) that should not require intervention of senior leaders must be distinguished from precedent-setting decisions of great significance (such as a decision relating to faculty compensation). Capturing consistency by building standard processes and predictable cycles⁸ helps the organization stay on course and frees the strategic leader to spend more of his or her extremely limited time focusing on the future.

V. OVERALL (AND MOST IMPORTANT)—DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF PASSION AND OPTIMISM

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that passion and optimism are not just desirable personal qualities; they are critical components of effective strategic leadership. As an example, at the JAG School I have been consistently concerned about our ability to stay responsive to the fast-changing training and educational needs of military lawyers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. I need not have worried. The JAG School faculty, many of whom have recent deployment experience, immediately and repeatedly have recognized the azimuth of a solution. Energized by an appreciation for the significance of this effort (passion) and by their great potential to respond to it (optimism), they have leveraged their own talent and experience to respond in ways I would have never envisioned.

8. Such processes and cycles are what the military would call Standard Operating Procedures or SOPs. See, e.g., Assistant Sec'y of the Army (Manpower & Reserve Affairs) Civilian Pers. Policy, Standard Operating Procedure No. C 01 (Sept. 16, 1998), <http://www.cpol.army.mil/library/general/bpm/sops/sop-c01.doc>.

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Being passionate and optimistic is easy when talented faculty and students surround you. Leaders blessed to find themselves in such an environment need to harness the power and brilliance of the staff and faculty. For the faculty, that means furnishing an azimuth, resources, and support. Individual effort is critical, but we also must consider the team. It is amazing how many individual contributions are needed to care for a law school and its students. Just as we rely on the staff and faculty to do the real work of the school, we need to preserve time for strategic focus by creating processes and empowering subordinates to take care of matters that do not require direct involvement on the part of senior leaders.

Leadership is undoubtedly critical to organizational success, but nobody ever said that leadership, or finding time to be an effective leader, is easy. This is particularly true with regard to strategic leadership and maintaining a long-term focus. The failure to distinguish matters of operational significance from those of strategic importance is a failure to keep the future in plain view. It is a virtual certainty that if a senior leader fails to keep the future in focus, nobody else will. Finally, if nothing else seems to be working, passion and optimism—for the team and for the strategic vision—will get you well down the road to where you ultimately believe the organization needs to go. Keeping in step, keeping it simple, one day at a time.