

THREE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE DEANING

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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:

1. An effective dean acts on the assumption that everyone associated with the school feels underappreciated at all times.
2. 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.
3. An effective dean keeps his or her own school, and his or her own role, in appropriately humble perspective.

The short essay that follows amplifies these three principles. It is not an attempt to distill the complete essence of management for a dean. Most effective deans are first and foremost effective managers of intelligent and talented people, just as are most leaders of business enterprises, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. The extensive literature on private and public sector management is therefore highly relevant to deans, as is the professional training in management available now in a wide array of programs and formats. Yet, law schools and universities present unique management challenges that often defeat the most talented leader imported from success in the profession or elsewhere. The first challenge is to motivate extremely talented and fiercely independent people who feel unappreciated. And they all do.

I. ACTING ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT EVERYONE FEELS UNDERAPPRECIATED AT ALL TIMES

Almost everyone in a law school is desperate for external recognition of his or her achievements and success. Law students, who compete aggressively but receive grades only twice a year and little feedback in between, are particularly starved for attention. But professors are little different. Indeed, even in moments when a faculty member is making tremendous professional strides—the article published

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to a glowing reception in a major journal, the class that is going extraordinarily well, the attention of the media to the professor's work—that faculty member is likely to be experiencing discouragement about how he or she is valued by the school. The administrators and staff are even more vulnerable to discouragement. They serve demanding students and are ultimately responsible to tenured faculty who seem to have much greater freedom in their work, and much better job security, than they do. Alumni are also prone to feel taken for granted by the school. Many believe they hear from the school only when it needs money, as a gift or as a loan payment, and that other alumni whose contributions to the school and the world are less significant nevertheless receive greater attention.

This seems a grim and exaggerated picture. There are, of course, exceptions. Almost all of us, at some point in our academic careers, have felt treasured and respected by the administration or the dean. Some have learned to treasure the moments of appreciation that a harried and busy institution can afford, and to get on with the work the rest of the time, including during the many instances where a personal sacrifice for the institution goes uncelebrated. But most of us, most of the time, feel underappreciated. We doubt whether the authority of the school, however it is constituted, really understands what we do for the school, and whether it appreciates us. A casual survey of students, faculty, staff, alumni, or administrators will almost always confirm this.

An example may help illustrate. 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.

This can get a little tiring, both for the dean and the few souls who listen to the dean often. At every reception, at every commencement, at every faculty meeting, at every alumni gathering, at every student party, the dean must be prepared to praise the right people for the right things—for example, acknowledging the people who have put the event together, or the milestones that have occurred in the school and the people who made them happen. The dean has to know what people are doing and what things they are doing well, and has to show that he or she knows that by talking about it with them in public and private settings. This requires, among other things, reading the scholarship of dozens of faculty members; attending manifold events put on by different student organizations and administrators; visiting classes on a regular basis; learning details of what alumni are doing and calling or writing them individually about achievements; taking time in a packed day to stop by the admissions office or the registrar's suite to see how things are going; and making an effort to know staff members and students by name. The most effective deans do this, apparently effortlessly and always seeming to enjoy every

detail of it. The reality is that this is work, requiring attention to detail, patience, and dedication.

The most impressive display of this principle I have ever seen came during the dedication of a new law school building at the University of Tennessee. During the remarks of the Governor of Tennessee at the outdoor ceremony in front of the building, the automatic sprinklers commenced spraying part of the audience. The dean, Richard Wirtz, rose and vanished into the building, and the sprinklers promptly stopped, to much acclaim for the dean from every subsequent speaker. Then Dean Wirtz rose to speak, and in his remarks he took time to thank, by name (and without making a joke of the incident) the custodian who knew the building so well that he could get to the shutoff valve in seconds. A good dean can make light of a difficult situation and apologize on behalf of the institution; an effective dean also uses the opportunity to thank by name the person who has performed the rescue.

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 second-hand. 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 discrete, 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 fifty 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. Effective deaning usually requires long hours. Others have accurately described the large volume of both routine and unexpected meetings, correspondence (including electronic mail),

telephone calls, interviews, and miscellaneous writing that a dean must do, and do promptly, in order to steward a law school.¹ There is also an extensive speaking and travel schedule. The speeches require careful writing. A handful of remarkable deans produce off-the-cuff masterpieces (though I sometimes suspect part of the virtuoso performance consists of making a carefully planned address appear unrehearsed). The travel, which usually includes meetings with alumni and key supporters of the school, also requires careful preparation. Upon return, even a dean who aggressively uses email and cell phones on the road will usually find a backlog of people and problems that require urgent attention.

There are other time demands that necessarily keep a dean from devoting attention to the key steps that advance the school. They are teaching, scholarship, and family. Deans have had both personal and professional lives before becoming deans. Professionally, those lives turned upon teaching well and writing meaningful scholarship. Neither is a skill that can be once learned and retained forever, like riding a bicycle. Teaching requires careful preparation, even when a course has been taught many times before, and the best teachers keep up with both the methods and the substance in their courses through painstaking effort every day. Writing is harder still. The best scholarship in law, as in other fields, requires a discipline of reading and writing that must be maintained, week in and week out, or the skill will atrophy quickly. A dean who takes pride in his or her accomplishments as a teacher and scholar, and who hopes to return to full-time teaching and writing at the conclusion of an administrative career, must somehow maintain a first-hand connection to the classroom and to the real struggle to produce scholarship. That is a huge time commitment, and the dean will often be reminded how much time is required by seeing his or her colleagues in action. Most deans, of course, at some point surrender the struggle to remain scholars, and many give up on teaching as well, but that also poses risks, one of which is the increasing distance between the daily experience of the faculty and the dean.

An even greater priority for most deans is their families. An academic life is in many ways a blessing to families, because faculty members often have blocks of unscheduled time, including summers and semester breaks, when the pace of work relents and there are more opportunities for sustained attention to children, spouse, or partners. Not so for deans. Becoming a dean can thus be a particularly tough transition for family members. There can be no substitute for the dean's personal time and attention to family, particularly during this transition.

For these reasons and others, the amount of time a dean is able to devote to the key steps for advancing the school is remarkably small. Effective deans delegate, of course, and if the school is particularly rich in resources they can delegate a lot. But the dean of even the wealthiest school will need to be aggressive in carving out time for the greatest institutional priorities, or else he or she will never get to 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

1. See, e.g., Paul Carrington, *Afterward: Why Deans Quit*, 1987 DUKE L.J. 342, 356-57.

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.

Lest this all seem abstract, I must invoke John Sexton, the dean of the New York University Law School. By almost any measure, he has been the most effective dean of his generation. His school has grown dramatically in resources, in reputation, and in the impact it has on its student's lives as well as on the legal and scholarly community. That success is undoubtedly attributable in part to Dean Sexton's unique personality and skills, in addition to the work of a legion of talented faculty and staff at New York University. But just as certainly, it is attributable to the dean's keeping his focus (and most of his efforts) on a relatively small number of priorities, including major donors and a strategic vision for the school.

III. A HUMBLE PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL AND SELF

A third attribute of most successful deans is that they manage to convey humility about their school when dealing with the rest of the University, and about their own role when dealing with everybody.

American law schools today are fortunate indeed. Law faculty salaries rival those of almost all other disciplines, and most law school facilities are the envy of the rest of the University. In many law schools intellectual life has never been more vigorous, and at the best there can be found workshops, courses, symposiums, and debates that draw upon the best scholars and students the University has to offer. Many law alumni are prosperous and supportive of their schools; law deans, unlike most deans of education, music, or religion, have many real prospects for generous alumni support.

This puts the typical law dean in an enviable position in working within the University. It can be tempting to become arrogant, to assume that the law school's fortunate position is based entirely upon merit and is one of permanent entitlement. The effective dean resists that temptation for two reasons. First, however important and helpful the law school can be to the University, it is not the core of the University, and should not act like it is. Law schools are professional schools that primarily exist to influence the development of law and to train bright students to practice law. That is a vital mission, particularly in the United States, but it is only a part, and not always a large one, of the central pursuit of knowledge at the University. Second, a law dean who does not manifest an understanding of the broader importance of the University, and of the law school's subsidiary role in the University, will not be effective in University politics over the long run. Such a dean is destined to receive less support than would otherwise be possible from key allies of the school in other departments, colleges, and in the central administration.

The effective law dean is also humble about his or her own role. When a dean steps down, it is often accompanied by a speech or article describing the huge steps forward the institution has made under his or her stewardship. Hyperbole is the order of the day; the listener is often left thinking that, like Moses, the dean came upon his people in debased servitude and led them to the Promised Land. The vocabulary of deaning can sometimes reflect this misleading model: deans are described as “running” their schools, and they can be caught saying “I hired Professor Smith” or “I raised \$2 million.”

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 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.

If deaning were a science, this essay would have identified the three defining traits that distinguish the species of effective deans from all others. There are surely other traits that I have neglected, and just as surely an exceptional dean who has succeeded despite never showing appreciation, never attending to major donors or faculty hiring or strategic vision, and always evincing arrogance. Nevertheless, I believe the three principles described are in fact practiced by most effective deans, and that most ineffective deans violate at least one and often all of them with regularity. This correlation may not be causation, but it is strong enough that it ought to give new deans pause. Deaning is an honorable and important occupation, and it gives tremendous satisfaction to those who are willing to work hard on the right things, and who can take satisfaction in sublimating their personal glory to that of the success of their school and the people who comprise it.