

# MANAGING THE DEAN'S CEREMONIAL ROLE

*John A. Miller*

*O Ceremony! Show Me but Thy Worth!*<sup>1</sup>

THE ceremonial role of the law school dean is a crucial aspect of the job.<sup>2</sup> Through ceremonies we honor our traditions, praise our achievements, mourn our losses, and bind our community together. It is often the dean's task to make these ceremonies stand up as expressions of principle and as pieces of theatre. In a typical year the dean must participate in dozens of ceremonies. In many cases the dean's participation may be deemed essential. This array of ceremonial events includes endowed lectures and symposia, awards ceremonies and banquets, bar meetings, Inns of Court meetings, moot court arguments, receptions for government officials or other honored guests, alumni events, sporting events, groundbreaking ceremonies, funerals, fundraisers, bar admissions ceremonies, and, of course, university and college graduation ceremonies. The sheer number of these events can be overwhelming. Ceremonial events often occur on evenings or weekends impinging on personal and family needs. I have heard more than one dean cite the demands of the ceremonial role as a reason for stepping down. In this brief essay I will describe some pragmatic techniques for managing the dean's ceremonial role in a way that allows the dean to be an effective public representative of the law school without permitting the ceremonial role to swamp an already busy professional and personal calendar.

Initially it should be noted that there is considerable variation in how taxing individual deans find the ceremonial aspects of the job. Though most deans are social animals, the rigors of attending, for example, an alumni tailgating party and football game affect individual deans differently depending on a wide range of personal characteristics. If you have young children or if you dislike football, as I do, then the many hours spent on Saturday afternoons watching two teams ramble up and down the gridiron are likely to be more aggravating for you than for the football aficionado whose children are grown. (A winning program also makes a big difference.) Similarly, people feel the rigors of public speaking differently. For some, standing before a large audience and delivering an engaging speech is a piece of cake. For others it requires careful preparation. The principles I describe in this essay should be applied flexibly with the individual's persona and lifestyle in mind.

## *Keep Your Priorities Straight*

The first and most obvious principle of managing ceremonial duties is to prioritize them. Some of the invitations must be declined or delegated to others in

---

\* Former Dean and Professor of Law, University of Idaho College of Law.

1. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *KING HENRY V* act IV I, 256.

2. I have elsewhere written about the rise in importance of the dean's external role. See generally John A. Miller, *The Modern Law Dean*, 50 J. LEGAL EDUC. 398 (2000).

order to meet the other demands of the deanship. Prioritizing involves the exercise of judgment, but many times it will be obvious which invitations must be accepted and which may be safely declined. In my view those items that should receive top priority include graduation (missing is simply not an option unless you or a loved one are on death's door), orientation, major donor events, major endowed lectures, student awards banquets, funerals, and moot court championships. The relative importance of the dean's attendance will vary depending on how prominent a role the dean is expected to assume. If, for example, the dean is invited to appear but not to speak, then one may usually assume that the dean's presence should have a lesser priority in her schedule. An important exception is funerals, about which I will say more later.

### *Send a Substitute When Appropriate*

When prioritizing it is important to consider which events are amenable to (or even require) the sending of a substitute. For example I always try to attend the swearing in ceremony for new lawyers in my state since about half of the participants are graduates of my school. But this is a ceremony where I feel comfortable sending a substitute such as the associate dean or a popular professor if necessary. I would feel remiss if no representative of the law school were present to congratulate the new lawyers. Similarly, I would not consider failing to attend the annual meeting of our state bar unless I had a worthy substitute. Other ceremonies in which a substitute is essential in the dean's absence include funerals and student awards ceremonies. Conversely, the many invitations to attend endowed lectures and public receptions at other law schools may be declined safely without sending a substitute.

### *Know Whether You Are Speaking*

If the dean attends an event it is important to determine whether she will be called upon to deliver a speech and how long it should be. This helps the dean in several ways. First, she may not be a good extemporaneous speaker and may need advance notice in order to be prepared. As someone who falls into this category I recall with angst an occasion early in my deanship at which I was called upon without warning to make an after dinner talk. I am only glad that the rambling babble that ensued was not caught on videotape. Second, advance notice permits the dean to do a better job of tailoring his remarks to the audience. Third, if the situation is appropriate it permits the dean to use visual aids. For example, when addressing alumni groups I like to use pictures to illustrate my points and to create the proper ambience. It is much better to show visually the latest renovations at the law school than to describe them with words. Similarly, the merriment and solemnity of graduation often are captured best with a few well-chosen pictures. Finally, knowing her role in the program gives the dean a better idea of how long she must stay at the event.

*Have Some Presentations in the Can*

A related point is that it is usual to have a few speeches and slide shows in the can. Every dean ought to have a good colorful slide show on his laptop that is appropriate for alumni groups. I think these shows should be strong on pictures and light on text.

*Know Who Will Be There*

It is always helpful to know in advance who will be attending the event. It makes remembering names easier. It also allows the dean to decide in advance who should be sought out and for what purpose. As an example I have often found that a few minutes conversation with the university president, the provost or a fellow dean at some university function can save us both time and energy. More significantly, an advance review of the guest list allows focusing on likely development prospects. The dean should be provided routinely with a guest list for any event hosted by the university or the college.

*Have Other Business Lined Up*

Especially if the ceremonial event involves a trip out of town, the dean should try to fold other business into the trip. Few trips fail to present a fundraising or other advancement opportunity. The dean should always give her development officer and other key staff advance notice of her ceremonial engagements so that they can plan around them. The dean's time is too valuable to be wasted by making several trips when one will do. But as a caveat I would add that depending on the length and frequency of the dean's travel, it might also be important to build some time for rest and exercise into the schedule.

*Make Judicious Use of the "Walkthrough"*

Everyone in public life has made at least occasional use of the walkthrough. This is the technique of showing up at an event and being seen by the right persons and then discreetly exiting before the event is scheduled to conclude. This technique can be risky. The most serious risk is that after the dean has left he may be called upon to make some remarks. The pregnant pause that follows is not easily forgotten or forgiven by those in attendance. I remember a dean once describing how he did a walkthrough at an event at which (he had forgotten) he was slated to receive an award. His absence during the awards ceremony was the subject of jocular ribbings for years to come. But there is no denying that the walkthrough is a useful way to get the minor aspects of the ceremonial job done without completely messing up your day. The safest places to use the walkthrough are large events where no speeches are called for such as public receptions, tailgate parties, and football games.

*Use Thoughtful Delegation*

Some ceremonial occasions such as lectures and banquets hosted by the law school are within the dean's control and can be crafted to minimize the burden and share the spotlight. In particular law school events present the opportunity for thoughtful delegation. For instance I nearly always carefully select someone else to introduce our guest speakers after I have made some welcoming remarks. I may call on a faculty member, a student, or a person outside the law school to make the introduction. Not only does this lighten the dean's load, it also confers honor on the person chosen and can add to the overall impact of the event if the right person is chosen. I try to find some one who shares some bond or interest with the speaker. For example, when David Halberstam presented a lecture at our school we brought back our former dean, Cliff Thompson, to make the introduction. The two were close friends dating back to their undergraduate days at Harvard. Cliff's introduction was far more personal and compelling than anything I might have offered. On two occasions I have been able to persuade the Governor of our state to introduce U.S. Supreme Court Justices to packed houses. This made for good theatre and good politics. On both occasions I asked the president of the university to introduce the Governor, a task he was more than glad to perform. This still left me with the role of introducing the university president but in circumstances where brevity was obviously called for. In a similar vein when the college hosts a banquet I always delegate the role of master of ceremonies to a member of the faculty. This maneuver still requires some welcoming remarks from the dean; but, otherwise, she is free to sit back and enjoy the show.

When I first became dean I thought it was my job to see personally to the graduation speaker's comfort for the duration of his or her visit to campus. I would spend as many as seven or eight hours in the speaker's company. Now I know better. This is another area where thoughtful delegation wins the day. When important guests are on campus the dean clearly needs to spend some quality time with them in order to show respect and to forge a tie that can serve the school in the future. However, it also makes sense to arrange for students and, sometimes, faculty to serve as the guest's personal escort. At graduation and at other major ceremonial occasions I now arrange for each important guest—speakers and honorary degree recipients, for example—to have a separate personal escort so that I am free to mingle or take time away from the guests as needed. I have found that the guest and the chosen host are almost always gratified by this arrangement. What law student would not be thrilled to escort Sandra Day O'Connor or Janet Reno for a day? Similarly, when I host an event such as a post-graduation dinner for the speaker, I like to invite as many students and faculty as can attend comfortably. Again it lightens the load and shares the honor.

Overall, thoughtful delegation of ceremonial duties not only conserves the dean's time and energy, it also produces better results. It confers honor and showcases talent. It cements relationships and creates lasting memories.

### *Good Staffing Makes All the Difference*

A corollary to the importance of thoughtful delegation is that good staffing makes all the difference. Anyone who has ever tried to settle on the arrangements for a high-end banquet knows what I mean. Events planning blends art with science. There is no substitute for careful attention to the details of guest lists, invitations, seating, lighting, decorating, catering, and otherwise configuring the venue for maximum positive effect. Now days security planning is also important. If the room is too hot, or if the microphone doesn't work, or if important guests are seated at out of the way tables (or worse, not seated at all) the evening can be ruined. Very few good things happen by accident in these settings.

Staff people do most of the hard work of making ceremonial events go smoothly. Thus, a dean who wants to host successful events must find, sometimes train, and keep good staff. In the early years of the deanship it is important that the dean is personally involved with the details of event planning so that the staff will know the dean's preferences and so that the dean will appreciate the magnitude and nuances of the task. In particular the dean needs to appreciate that successful events often require months of planning. The recruitment of speakers, the creation of attractive brochures, and the development of a good program all require adequate advance preparation.

There are many aspects to finding, training, and keeping good staff. In my view the two most important things for a dean to do in this process are to give frequent and public praise for good work by staff and to make every effort to inculcate a sense that the dean and the staff are a team in the events planning arena. Ceremonial events are not likely to go smoothly unless responsible staff take ownership of the events. They will do this much more freely if they feel appreciated and are treated as the dean's colleague and partner in the enterprise.

### *Know When to Say No*

There are simply too many ceremonial events to attend them all. Sometimes the dean has to say no, but saying no takes tact. It is best to decline invitations promptly and with appropriate expressions of regret. I often write a personal handwritten note or I telephone to decline an invitation rather than have one of my staff do the dirty work. Equivocation and delay only make the rejection more difficult for all parties concerned. If there is a good reason, it should be given. One of the reasons for saying no that should not be given but which is still good grounds for declining is if the dean is worn out from other duties. Deaning is a job that requires pacing oneself.

### *A Special Word about Funerals*

Of all the events that I failed to attend during my deanship the ones that bother me still are the funerals of alumni and friends of the law school with whom I had at least a modest acquaintance. A funeral is a moment of crisis and in a crisis a leader should show up. At a minimum the dean's presence shows respect for the departed. If I missed a funeral, I always had a good reason. Usually I was already

scheduled to be somewhere else. But still I harbor the vague feeling that no reason is good enough, especially when I know that the dean's presence would mean something to the family of the deceased. In retrospect I think that I should have been more willing to change my plans to accommodate life's last public ceremony.

### *In Conclusion*

Ceremony is important. It imbues ordinary events with new meaning and etches lasting memories. Ceremony provides closure in times of triumph and disaster. It brings people together and honors great achievements of mind, body, and spirit. Ceremony provides opportunity for education and renewal. It celebrates the human experience.

The Dean's ceremonial role cannot be neglected, yet it cannot displace other duties. The successful dean finds ways to fulfill the ceremonial role without failing elsewhere. This success must blend efficient teamwork, thoughtful delegation, and balanced judgment with a decent public persona. I have not talked here about this last point because it is a topic unto itself. Instead the focus here is on management technique. But it must be remembered that no amount of technique will substitute for a public manner that conveys substance and sincerity.