

## STAFF MATTERS

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THE significance of *the staff* was highlighted for me as soon as I was named Dean. In a statement about my appointment, I expressed my gratitude for the chance to lead a law school supported by an energetic president and provost and boasting of accomplished faculty, students, and alumni. My appreciation for the campus' central administration, and for my colleagues and current and former students, was (and is), indeed, sincere. I failed at the time, however, to express appreciation for the law school's staff. As a (non-faculty) assistant dean put it bluntly about my omission: "I see you left the staff out. You'll soon see who really makes things happen around here!"<sup>1</sup>

Most new law deans (and other new educational leaders) are unprepared for their dealings with staff. Most faculty members' primary exposure to the staff often has been to the secretary who assists them. They may have limited contact with a few other staff members who help them on select projects, committees, travel planning and reimbursement, or with teaching and exam logistics. But only deans deal with the overall staff infrastructure; the processes of staff communication, coordination, and motivation of staff toward common goals; and the panoply of personnel issues in the institutional bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of the staff often is understated. Non-instructional staff usually outnumber the faculty. The dean's management, and leadership of the staff, is a significant factor in a school's success. The longer the deanship, the more a dean will appreciate the fact that staff are just as much his or her colleagues as are faculty.<sup>3</sup> I am grateful for the immense contributions made by staff at my own school. But it takes time to develop a staff and to learn how to make optimal use of its talents. And one of the least pleasant parts of deaning is dealing with that small fraction of staff who under-perform in one way or another—those rare staff for whom placement, supervision, or even improvement is a challenge. Like most faculty, students, and alumni, however, most staff are enjoyable to know and work with.

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\* Dean and Thomas E. McMillan Professor of Law, The University of Alabama. J.S.D. Columbia University (1988). I appreciate the helpful comments on this essay before its publication from Sarah Barger, Nancy Barrett, Judy Bonner, Bill Brewbaker, Carolyn Dahl, Bryan Fair, Joe Espy, Tony Freyer, Noah Funderburg, Tim Greene, Susan Hamill, Wythe Holt, Susan Randall, Cleo Thomas, Sybil Todd, and Mike Wyckoff. I also appreciate Deanie McCool's typing and revising this essay.

1. That "quotation" captures the essence of what the assistant dean advised me, but it is only my paraphrased recollection of his statement, made numerous years ago.

2. See generally RAY T. FORTUNATO & D. GENEVA WADDELL, PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION (1981).

3. The staff typically includes a few individuals who also are professors, but this essay focuses mostly on staff who are not part of the tenured faculty. This essay also omits discussion of staff recruitment, although, particularly with staff directly reporting to the dean, the process of putting together an administrative team is important and worthy of a separate writing.

Staff members' job descriptions, titles, employment classifications, and pay grades are extremely varied. It is easy, if unfair, for staff to perceive themselves playing second fiddle to the faculty. But staff members are equally valuable, in their way and should be so treated. They can become the dean's advisors and professional friends, though the dean must retain the ability to supervise them. Hierarchy is important, but can create institutional challenges. The lower a position's classification—for example, a secretary may be an "eight," while an advancement director a "seventeen," in a campus' human resources scheme (or maze)—the lower its perceived standing, and the greater the challenge for supervisors to find ways to include its occupant in the common institutional cause. Deans must consistently express appreciation to staff, without being either patronizing or false, and should include staff in school events and meetings if possible. Staff who have been made to feel welcome, worthwhile, and a real part of the team are more likely to attend and participate freely in the gatherings to which they are invited.

Faculty always have two or three ranks; law students are always in three classes. They know where they stand. Staff have to deal with several, sometimes shifting hierarchical relationships at the law school, not only *vis-a-vis* law students and faculty, but also *vis-a-vis* each other, as well as staff throughout campus. But whatever role a staff member plays, it should be valued for its contribution in advancing the school's academic mission. That value should be directly expressed to the person producing it. Whether it is a secretary locating and revising a "lost" faculty manuscript that ultimately is published and relied on by scholars and judges, the advancement officer whose tact and persistence secures resources for need-based student scholarships, or the director of technology who facilitates and builds curricular chat rooms or the web site crucial to an emerging center of educational excellence, the staff person is contributing to the school's progress in unique and fundamentally important ways.

The dean has the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that staff members understand the value of their contribution. He or she must demonstrate the institution's appreciation of those accomplishments and set a tone of mutual support so that other supervisors know to do the same. As I once heard another administrator aptly put it, every employee has the same innate worth; it is the marketplace that assigns different values to (and thus remuneration for) the jobs we each perform. It is the duty not just of the dean, but of all staff supervisors, as well as faculty, to reinforce the sense that the academic community values staff contributions. Supervisors must take the time to explain how assignments fit into the institutional mission. Staff, in turn, should be encouraged, by message and by tone, to view their work not just mechanically or non-contextually, but with appropriate responsibility and pride. When there are openings, deans must recruit staff who share the philosophy of productive team work.

The dean's institutional relationship with staff members depends largely on their duties. The dean of an average size law school may have about ten "direct reports"—that is, ten reporting relationships without any administrative intermediary. For example, the dean may directly supervise the "heads" (assistant or associate deans or directors) of academic affairs; administration (building, personnel, purchasing); library; clinic; career services; continuing legal education;

advancement; and student recruitment. The number of direct reports and reporting arrangements vary depending on the size of the school, its budget, and history. A law school's infrastructure resembles that of a small university with various administrative units reporting to the dean.

Good communication between the dean and his/her direct reports is essential to a well-led law school. Deans must establish ways to keep a handle on institutional matters and priorities without micromanaging.<sup>4</sup> The right balance is the key. Delegating day-to-day management issues frees the dean to handle external, campus, and big-picture issues. With new staff, the Dean should review not only institutional goals but the means by which tasks will be completed; with experienced staff, the Dean should focus mostly on objectives, giving the staff increased leeway on executing the plan.

While deans must see the big picture, and not micromanage daily operations, they must keep up sufficiently with the intermediate category of issues that occupy the "middle burner" of importance (such as a pending \$20,000 scholarship proposal to a donor, or a new course proposal pending in a committee). For such matters, regularly scheduled meetings (weekly or bi-weekly) between the dean and his/her direct reports usually will permit the dean to provide appropriate direction. Such meetings are particularly beneficial when the staff person is empowered with the responsibility to outline the agenda beforehand of items requiring reports and discussion.

The dean should solicit the ideas of his/her direct-reports and be open to input, especially to constructive criticism. However, when the conference-room door opens at the end of a meeting, the staff should pull together, hopefully with a consensus, but following the dean's lead. As I once heard another dean express it, after the huddle, it is impossible for the quarterback to lead the team down field if his or her offensive line isn't blocking. The dean should be open-minded about hearing from staff about which plays to call, but, once the huddle breaks, he or she should not be tackled by his or her own team. In difficult instances where the dean's decision won't please everyone, the dean should try to explain the rationale, but should be clear that the staff's support is needed to implement the final decision.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to dealing frequently with directors and assistant deans, deans have continuous contact with their executive assistant and secretaries. The dean's office secretarial staff should be dedicated to the dean and assist with daily operations. The dean-secretarial relationship has to be one of mutual respect. Over time, a dean should determine how best a secretary can be of daily help—from providing copies of the next day's schedule the night before; to scheduling the dean's days in blocks

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4. Of course, in those instances where greater supervision is needed, it is the dean's responsibility to see that that supervision is available, giving staff a reasonable opportunity to get up to speed on assigned duties, particularly when occupying a new position.

5. Most staff recognize that deans must make numerous decisions, some of which are tough. Deans ordinarily should approve staff recommendations about mundane matters and should consult with staff (and others) on challenging matters. As long as the dean's decision is ethical and not unreasonable, it generally deserves support. Of course, in the long run, deans and key staff must be on the same page on most matters if the team is to offer the institution continuity. I have been fortunate to have an associate dean and two assistant deans with me for over eight years (and counting).

of time for various tasks to be accomplished productively: to regulating courteously and efficiently the constant flow of people and requests that reach the dean's office, taking into account the priorities at hand. But knowing how to delegate, how to let others support us, is a skill that most deans must develop. The dean won't be effective with significant fundraising, academic, recruitment, and planning matters without freedom from mundane tasks. In addition, the dean must trust the staff's judgment about which matters need decanal attention. Such prioritization may take time to articulate and implement, with the dean communicating goals and objectives to the staff. It takes a while to get used to leading an office.

Deans must communicate directly and clearly with their staff; set deadlines; define expectations and goals; and determine how much oversight is needed over the means of achieving the objective at hand. When a job doesn't get done well or on time, a dean first should ask: "Did I clearly explain the task at hand and the framework for completing the task?" "Did I ensure that the tools needed were at hand for the staff to succeed in the job?" or "Were the reasons for the lack of success due to the staff person's own lack of commitment to the task and/or factors beyond the dean's control?" A lack of success should be just as instructive as a success in most instances; deans must learn lessons from administrative matters that have been problematical.

Staff members have a responsibility for their performance, work product, presence, and timeliness. Although it is against the nature of most kind souls who initially chose the wonderful, intellectual career of being a professor rather than an administrator, a dean must be ready to take action to discipline the few staff who, despite notice, don't meet their job expectations. It simply isn't fair to have different sets of rules for different staff, or to have similarly classified staff handle different amounts of work. A dean should not do the work of the staff, but instead should be able to rely on their work product. Just as deans should not be "micromanagers," they should not have to be proofreaders and editors, fixing obvious errors on routine projects. They should not have to be timekeepers for staff attendance and punctuality. Thankfully, few staff need such oversight. Most are mature, responsible, and productive; they fully understand the importance of staff morale in observing cooperatively simple institutional policies.

When staff need the dean to make a decision, they should, whenever possible, carefully and comprehensively define the question so that it can be answered with a concrete answer (e.g., with a "yes" or "no" answer). Just as we train law students to "frame" issues as part of their analytical education, deans similarly should help staff to learn how to crystallize the matter or question at hand. Deans must be able to rely 100% on the information the staff provides on issues requiring his or her attention.

The staff works optimally when it knows what matters need prompt decanal attention. Those matters should be summarized, with staff assuming responsibility to focus and sharpen issues and make initial recommendations for their resolution. A dean juggles ever-increasing amounts of work, so if staff can handle not only routine matters, but can also highlight and help define significant and pressing issues, they buttress the dean's productivity.

Deans must not tolerate lack of professionalism. The workplace environment must be respectful of all the institution's employees. Campus policies must be

followed swiftly fairly, and fully whenever there are complaints of any kind of harassment or discrimination.

Monthly staff meetings involving the entire group of direct-reports, plus select second-level reporting staff, are helpful. The dean should set a minimal agenda at such meetings, with each attendee, instead, being given the responsibility to report on his/her area. The meeting should not be wasted on reconciling calendars or on minutiae (which email can handle), but on the five or six most significant items each person is working on. The dean should inform the staff of important faculty and academic matters they may not have heard about. In turn, all substantial news should be communicated throughout the administrative hierarchy by those attending the meeting. Staff leaders subsequently should communicate with their own direct reports about significant items that were discussed at the meeting. Communication is indispensable to effective staff leadership. Though regular meetings facilitate and streamline the discussion of institutional matters, deans should be available for staff to drop by to chat if necessary on an ad hoc basis. Deans, too, occasionally should make "house calls" to staff offices.

Regarding staff (particularly clerical) who do not report directly to the dean, a balance is needed; the dean should be available to the staff, but should not ordinarily override their usual supervisors. It is a difficult tightrope to walk between wanting to help a staff person, and wanting to support those chosen to lead the particular department or area. A dean should not be insensitive to the staff's concerns or oblivious to the daily patterns of supervisory communication. The dean should be sure that staff supervisors are appropriately part of the communications loop. When the rare conflict arises among staff, or between faculty and staff, the dean may help facilitate the problem's resolution. Essential to such problem solving is the dean trying to get the parties talking productively with each other. The dean should not try to solve everyone's problems, but should encourage and support individuals, in at least the first instance, to come up with their own ways to address the conflict.

Deans should not underestimate the importance of language and expression in communicating with staff, especially in challenging situations. Particularly given the role deans play at a law school, they must choose their words carefully and express themselves calmly

Of course, as dean, it is much more gratifying to help enable staff to implement a novel and good idea than to deal with the rare instances of misfeasance, mistreatment, and mischief. Even if only one percent of any employee pool (including deans) commit truly misguided or inappropriate acts, that one percent of staff problems can take perhaps twenty percent of a dean's time a few days each year. Though it can be frustrating, deans must recognize that a disproportionate amount of a few days will be spent on isolated personnel problems.

Morale among staff is exceedingly important. Deans should cheerlead, highlighting the school's achievements and the staff's role in that success. The employment atmosphere must be comfortable and collegial, but professional. Though deans are leaders, they are not monarchs; all staff bear responsibility for the school's environment. Deans should be polite and positive, but also direct, clear, and forthright; it is their job to help ensure that staff members are doing their jobs with integrity, timeliness, and efficiency. The institution requires nothing less.

Deans should encourage staff to attend conferences and training seminars aimed at professional improvement, advancement, and networking.<sup>6</sup> The dean must identify the funds for such education, just as he/she locates funding for faculty professional travel. I cannot recall turning down staff funding requests for professional travel and relevant educational opportunities. Whether it is a secretary taking a one-day campus workshop on writing skills or a development officer's three-day trip to learn about brick-and-mortar projects, the time away from the staff person's daily duties should be a wise investment, benefitting both the employee and the institution. Such training also may help advance staff careers, which is a laudable goal.

If staff help manage the school's day-to-day work, then the faculty can educate students and produce scholarship. A good dean will enable the staff to perform its essential role in a school's pursuit of academic excellence. If the significance of the staff, and of staff management and motivation, is not apparent to new educational leaders, it will be within a short time of their appointment.

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6. See PETER SELDIN, *EVALUATING AND DEVELOPING ADMINISTRATIVE PERFORMANCE* 145-90 (1988).