

THE DEAN'S ROLE IN BUILDING A POSITIVE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

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MUCH of a dean's job involves reaching out to various communities. We reach out to and build relationships with alumni and donors for needed financial support. We reach out to and build relationships with members of the bench and the bar to help expand employment opportunities for our students. We reach out to and build relationships with members of the University community to ensure cooperation and access to resources. We reach out to and build relationships with our students.

This essay is about reaching out to and building relationships with our most important communities: those who work within the law school. In these difficult economic times, most law schools face the challenge of doing more with less. Budgets have been reduced, staffing levels have fallen, and there are limits on how much we want to raise tuition in light of the economic conditions our students face. To do well in this environment and to provide the most effective legal education and student services we can, we must make identifying and fostering the "people potential" of our institutions a high priority.

This essay is about treating people the way you would want to be treated and setting a tone of professionalism and mutual respect. Although most of the discussion deals with professional and hourly staff relations, many of the principles also apply to relations with faculty and students. Some of these ideas may seem simple, but our fast-paced work environments and complex schedules make it very easy to overlook them. I think they are more important than most people realize. As a former labor lawyer and labor arbitrator, I have studied the world of work for my entire career. I have seen countless examples of problems that could have been avoided with timely communication or demonstrated respect.

I have learned that job satisfaction comes from:

- knowing that you make a difference;
- knowing that you are appreciated;
- knowing that you are part of a group doing something that matters;
and
- knowing that you can continue to learn and grow.

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As a dean, you have a unique opportunity to influence how people feel about their work and to engage them in setting the institution's direction. The better you help them achieve these four goals, the more job satisfaction they will have, and the better they will be at serving students and helping us create more effective law school communities.

The advice I share is also founded on my experience as a law professor and a dean beginning his third deanship. I have learned certain lessons from my mistakes. Others, I have learned from watching others. Additionally, I have learned lessons from heeding the advice of wise colleagues and co-workers.

We all talk a better game than we play, and I will admit that there have been times when I have not followed this advice. This is an area of continuing growth for all of us.

I. CREATE A COMMUNITY OF TRUST AND POSITIVE ENERGY

We need a secure and stable environment to do our best. A dean can help build this environment by helping people feel safe, trusted, and respected.

A. *Model a Positive Outlook with a Personal Touch*

The dean is uniquely situated to affect the tone of the law school. By walking the halls, greeting people, and stopping by their offices and desks with a cheerful message, you can make the day better. By expressing a personal interest in people's lives, you open avenues of communication that will pay benefits. Find, encourage, and appreciate the cheerful people. Think about random acts of kindness. Come in early and be the one to make the coffee sometimes. Help out when furniture needs to be moved. Establish informal events that lighten the tone, whether they are ice cream socials, monthly birthday celebrations, raffles, or contests with prizes for predicting the size of the entering class, the number of students who will attend a program, or when the elevator will be fixed.

When the law school faces challenges, it is important that the dean remains positive and that people know the problems will be resolved. Our message has to be, "There is a way to succeed. We will find it."

B. *Communicate and Care*

In an uncertain world, a dean's willingness to share information is appreciated. Have meetings and send emails updating people on law school developments concerning admissions, fundraising, speakers, placement, hiring, and other important topics. Meet with people to learn what they are doing so that you can share the good news about staff, student, and faculty achievements and celebrate as a community. Share information about developments at the University, especially those that might impact people's lives. If the University changes personnel policies and wants to advise people by mailing a letter to their homes on Friday, insist that you be given the opportunity to tell them in person and deal with questions and concerns. For things that affect groups like benefit reductions or new attendance discipline policies, meet with the affected group,

make sure that information is accurate, and reassure them of steps the law school will take to protect them or temper the blow. For things that affect individuals like layoffs, meet with them in private and share what you can. Even if the news is not good, people appreciate that you respect them enough to tell them in person and care enough to help them think through the next steps. The way you handle these situations will have a multiplier effect in the workplace. People's friends care very much how they are treated. If you deal with a person with respect and caring, their friends' support for you will grow. If you do not, they will be angry that their friend was treated poorly and will doubt your sincerity.

C. Exhibit Consistent Behavior

The dean is on a stage and, whatever the frustrations of the day, needs to be (or pretend to be) calm and even-tempered. People will be comfortable being creative and providing helpful and honest feedback only if they trust that the dean will not lose his or her temper or lose confidence in them if things go slightly awry. Unpredictable anger and even expressed disappointment create tension that causes long-term harm.

D. Be Slow to Blame

Every day, reports come in from students, faculty, alumni, and University officials that someone in the law school has done something "wrong." Often, these reports are inaccurate. Often, they are based on hearsay. Sometimes they emanate from an accuser's ill will. When sharing a negative report with the person involved, it is important to keep an open mind and assume good motives rather than accusing the person. Even one ill-founded accusation by a dean can send a message to a person that he or she is not trusted and undo dozens of positive moments. Getting the accused person's side of the story before reacting is an important way to demonstrate trust. If a mistake has been made, it can then be dealt with in a positive way. Lines of communication remain open, and the person can be involved in creating a solution: "Let's talk about how we can fix this. What are your ideas?"

II. CREATE A CULTURE OF RESPECT AND APPRECIATION

Showing respect to staff, students, and faculty will pay great dividends. It begins with little things like occasionally visiting people at their offices or workstations rather than always summoning them to your office.

A. Seek Advice and Opinions

Asking members of the staff and faculty for their advice on things big and small is not a sign of weakness and can make them feel valued. They all know things you do not know. When you ask for advice, you send a message to the person being asked that he or she matters and has something to contribute. If you take the advice, be sure to tell him or her how you were influenced. Sometimes it

will be appropriate to give public credit for an idea. Other times, a sincere thank you for their help will be the right thing to do.

B. Insist on Respect for Others

Law is a helping profession in which how people are treated matters. If a law student is rude to a staff member, insist that the student apologize and make sure he or she understands the consequences of rude behavior in a professional career. Similarly, if an unthinking faculty member is rude, he or she, too, should apologize. When members of the staff know that you respect and protect their dignity, they will be far more willing to respect yours and help you move forward. When chairing (or umpiring) a faculty meeting, work to maintain a culture of both civility and open discussion, and ensure that the more polite people have at least as great an opportunity to contribute as the boldly outspoken.

C. Praise Often

Praise can be especially important to a new employee who might be unsure about how he or she is doing or to a staff member taking on new responsibilities. When there is a new dean, all staff members will be a little uncomfortable until they know that they are valued. Take every opportunity to appreciate staff and faculty.¹ Sometimes a thank you is sufficient. Other times an email will do. For really good things, a handwritten note will be particularly effective. There will also be opportunities to provide public praise at meetings or gatherings to celebrate particular achievements. A dean is uniquely positioned to show respect every time he or she introduces a member of the staff or faculty. At speaker events, I enjoy introducing the faculty member who will introduce the speaker (making my job title “the person who introduces the person who introduces the speaker”). This gives me the opportunity to share the faculty member’s accomplishments and prominence with students and lawyers who might not be aware of them. Similarly, alumni events provide the opportunity to introduce the audience to the accomplishments of talented and valuable members of the law school staff. This is a public way to show them your personal appreciation and to help build their credibility in the alumni community.

D. Create Appreciation Events

A law school succeeds because some members of the staff, student body, and faculty set a positive tone and make things happen. Finding ways to celebrate these people in a way that brings the law school community together will be an important means for you to say thank you and encourage similar

1. When you praise someone for a success, be careful not to deflate the praise with an offhand comment. Avoid the “Great job, but...” trap if you can. For example, “You did a great job planning this event ...” is praise. “You did a great job but I was hoping for more people” devalues the praise and turns a positive moment into a negative one. When you meet to plan the next event, you can then talk about how to enhance future attendance.

contributions from others. Among other things I have enjoyed is creating an annual staff appreciation luncheon with awards. Members of the staff, faculty, and sometimes students nominate a staff member for his or her extraordinary contributions. Staff members are asked to fill out nomination forms explaining why the person nominated is special. He or she might be the one to help out when you are overworked or the one who listens with care when you have a family tragedy. He or she might be the person who brightens everyone's day with a good word. In presenting the award, I am able to read some of the nomination forms submitted for the winner (without revealing the nominator) as well as some of the other nice things said about others (revealing neither nominators nor nominees on these) as a way of sharing our sense of community. The nominations help me, too, to appreciate the often unsung efforts of the good citizens. Additionally, the nominations can be the basis for a personal message down the road.

I have held student organization recognition banquets for the same reason, bringing together law review, moot court, trial advocacy, student government, PILA, WLSA, BLSA, and other organizations for a year-end banquet at which they can salute their leaders in front of the greater community. I present Outstanding Service Awards at this banquet to those student leaders who have made a difference. A Public Service Recognition Reception supplements these efforts by letting us recognize the many who volunteer for the public good. Some schools do more. In a 2004 Dean's Essay, for example, Dean Darby Dickerson shared details on Stetson's admirable staff recognition and appreciation programs.² Designed to support her efforts to increase staff recognition and morale, the program includes an employee newsletter, special programs for staff, recognition and service awards, and gift certificates to recognize good work.

Recognizing faculty is also important. Publicizing faculty achievements, scholarship, and service allows students, alumni, staff, and other faculty to appreciate them and will enhance faculty effectiveness and credibility.

E. Deal with Criticism Openly and Sometimes in Private

In every community, there are people who are critical of new ideas, especially those of a dean. When the criticism is raised in public, it is important not to be defensive, but to welcome all input. We all want to be part of a community in which ideas are freely exchanged and disagreements do not leave the meeting room. Sometimes, those who raise questions are the most valuable people in the room because every idea can be made better and there may be more effective alternatives that can be explored. When the criticism seems more than idea-based, however, it is often both disarming and effective to visit the critic in his or her office and share ideas. Beginning my first deanship, I encountered a senior and accomplished faculty member who was rumored to have been a thorn in the side of the previous dean and who seemed almost angry in the tone of

2. See generally Darby Dickerson, "Staff Matter(s)," 36 U. TOL. L. REV. 47 (2004).

some of his remarks at faculty meetings. I visited him in his office to discuss our apparent disagreements and to let him expand on his ideas while I asked follow up questions. At the end of our conversation, I explained where I disagreed, why I was going forward, and my hope that we could agree to disagree on this one item and still have a good working relationship. Rather than reacting poorly, he was grateful that I took the time to hear him out, and we developed a friendship of mutual respect in subsequent years. The meeting also gave me the opportunity to learn about some difficult personal challenges he was going through, and I learned how to be helpful. Had I labeled him an “enemy” in my mind, I never would have gotten to have such a friend. Although not all efforts will end so well, they will let you rest easy in the knowledge that you have done all you can do.

F. Provide Guidance in Private

Just as there will be times for praise, there will be times when you need to help people do a better job. Even here, you can be nice without being weak. If you criticize a person in front of others, you will create resentment and barriers to communication. If you meet privately, explain your perception and expectations, and give the person a chance to respond, you will have a far better chance of improving performance. We are all quite sensitive to criticism, even when well-intended. Handling such moments well is truly an art.³ Sometimes, the problem will be a simple one of miscommunication. Other times, it may be a problem requiring better efforts. If you can introduce the subject with something like “It seems to me that you’ve been having problems with What can you tell me about this?” you may learn things that will make you glad you did not start out with a more hostile or accusatory tone. There have been times, for example, when I have been tempted to start a meeting with a very critical tone, but then learned that the person was dealing with an illness or a family tragedy. In such cases, I have been very happy I did not begin on a judgmental note which would have blocked communication. Instead, I was able to express support and work with the person to create a productive solution to the work issues. For those situations that do not involve personal revelations, you will want to end the meeting with a clear agreement on future steps. In serious situations, you will want to memorialize the agreement by providing the person a short memo confirming what is expected. Even in such situations, a tone of respect is good: “Thank you for meeting me to discuss recent delays in I appreciate your willingness to deal with this problem and understand you will be ... in the future. Let’s meet again in six weeks to assess our progress.” For the very serious situations, of course, we need to convey the seriousness and potential for

3. I think most of us remember words of criticism, especially from those we respect, far longer than we remember words of praise. It can help to begin the conversation with something positive to praise, which can then be followed with a transition such as, “However, I’m concerned about ...” leading into a two-way conversation about the situation and its solution. If it is possible to conclude with another message of praise and a sense of constructive direction, the criticism will more likely be deemed constructive.

discipline or discharge. Even then, though, we can find a way to include a message of “I want you to succeed.” Positive outcomes require positive attitudes.

G. Extend These Attitudes to Mid-level and Hourly University Staff

A law school within a University must rely on others. Middle-level and hourly University staff in departments such as personnel, payroll, public relations, and bookkeeping are all our partners in serving our students. Many of their departments have suffered cutbacks and are understaffed. Many of their staff members are underappreciated and often criticized by those they serve. Some work in a political environment, not unique to universities, in which some people rise to managerial ranks by being subservient and respectful to those of higher rank and bullies to those in lower ranks.

The law school can develop a unique reputation and working relationship in such an environment. In some universities, we benefit from an atmosphere of low expectations in which they expect the law school and its people to be arrogant or to demand special treatment. Although we will sometimes need special treatment, we can impress and stand out by showing respect and consideration. We can begin every request by thanking them for prior help and acknowledging that we know how busy they are. We can engage them in personal conversation and find out who they are. We can remember their names and try to meet with them in person sometimes, rather than sending emails and memos to faceless strangers. When a staff member does something well for us, we can send a detailed thank you with a copy to the person’s supervisor. When we call or see them walking, we, unlike many of their constituencies, can be friendly and cheerful. In some universities, these behaviors will be so unique that the people with whom you deal will be motivated to help you, to give you an early warning of developments, and to be considerate of your students (whom we must also train to treat staff with respect).

III. CREATE A CLIMATE OF GROWTH

Many jobs can become routine unless there are opportunities to continue to learn, improve, and master new challenges. Part of a dean’s job is to help members of the staff achieve the kind of growth that can enhance job satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness. To do this, you need to get to know people, invest in their futures, and trust them with increasing responsibilities.

A. Listen and Learn

Most people are quite interesting and have reserves of talent, resourcefulness, and goodwill not immediately visible. Many members of the staff and faculty have had previous jobs that helped them develop valuable skills and expertise, and others have had specialized training. Some staff members, however, may feel that they are pigeonholed into limited roles on an organizational chart—roles that do not permit them to demonstrate all they can

do. When you show a sincere interest in staff members and learn who they are and what they can do, you can often develop expanded roles that will make their jobs more rewarding and your law school more effective. As you learn about their values and what they care about, you can find enthusiastic partners for progress.

B. Invest in Their Futures

An important way to show your trust and confidence in someone is to invest in his or her future by funding professional development opportunities, including conference travel. Our universities often limit the salaries we can offer and the raises we can give. Funding a professional conference for a staff member or faculty member who has potential is a way to show our confidence in them and our respect for what they do. On their return, you can give them a forum to share what they learned. This will expand their abilities and enhance their stature in your community as well.

C. Learn to Delegate

Deans take on countless tasks and are often overextended. There are some projects for which the dean may feel most qualified. Whether it is drafting a brochure or developing an extensive plan, you may think that the best way to get the job done quickly and “right” is to do it yourself. Other times, you will take on a task in the hopes of sparing a valued staff member from being further overburdened. Whatever the motivation for our efforts, we all come to realize that we cannot do it all ourselves.⁴ What we do not always understand is that this realization is a healthy one, and that there are many costs and lost opportunities when you try to do it all by yourself.

First, other people will have different perspectives, some of which will lead to better results. By involving others, you will gain from these insights and learn to value the input of those who have them. Second, the jobs of those who work with you will be more satisfying and their personal growth enhanced with more responsibility. Even if you could have done a job “better,” you are investing in their futures by helping them build skills and confidence. What they learn will enhance future projects, and their newfound abilities will ensure that things are done in a timely fashion rather than having to wait for you to find time to complete them. Third, by working together on a project with one or more colleagues, you will improve your relationship and learn to appreciate their talents. Fourth, you will have far more “buy-in” for projects from people if they have been involved in the planning and creation of the project. At one of the first

4. *Exodus* 18:17-26 (RSV) reports that when Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law, heard Moses’s plan to serve as judge for all disputes arising among the people, he told Moses, “What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone,” and said that he should find and train able people to be leaders who would hear all disputes except for the very difficult cases, which would be brought to Moses. Accordingly, Moses did so.

faculty meetings of my first deanship, I presented a plan to which I had devoted several hours of work. As a once able lawyer and former associate dean, I thought it was well written, that I had covered every issue, and that I had planned for every contingency. After I presented it, I stood back awaiting acclamation and applause for this “brilliant” plan. This did not occur. Instead, I got questions on every part, including questions as to why the plan was even necessary. Ultimately, I came to appreciate that the friendly critics with their different perspectives provided valuable input, and that involving them earlier would have produced a better plan and one that would have had much more support.

The keys to successful delegation and engagement begin with the assignment. If you create a detailed template and merely assign discrete tasks, you reduce the growth opportunities and narrow the breadth of the project’s potential success. If you can discuss the purpose, goals, and needs that make the project important and then involve the people who will be doing the work in the planning of necessary steps and timetables, they will have a much better feeling about it all. Although periodic progress reports are important, if you can avoid “hovering” and micromanaging details, you may find that the person or group can achieve the goals in innovative ways you may not have considered. If the project’s success is due in part to a person’s ideas, execution, and input, then he or she will build confidence and have a justifiable sense of pride that will enhance job satisfaction. Your role is then to recognize this contribution.

A final benefit of learning to delegate without micromanaging is that you will have more time for the community building, people-oriented parts of your job. I have often found myself engaged in a project, a book supplement, or an article and had to remind myself to leave the office and interact with people. “People over projects” is a phrase worth repeating. There are others in the law school community who can write, plan, and proofread. The dean, however, is uniquely situated to help motivate and support the people doing the work that matters.

Paying attention to, respecting, and appreciating the wisdom, creativity, good will, and personal qualities of law school staff will pay dividends extending beyond the school year and beyond your deanship. You will make friends for life and contribute to a people-centered environment that will serve your students and alumni well.