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The Dean and the Age of Change

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During a recent conversation among deans they commiserated over how difficult it was to bring about changes in their schools. Despite their best efforts at communicating the need for change, cultivating support, and implementing strategies, change was happening too slow or blocked by key players. In some cases, necessary changes were derailed as exasperated deans found it necessary, as one dean put it, "to pick my battles. I only have so much energy to give." As tends to be the case, bringing about change requires a constant push against inertia, at the very least. One dean commented that few in her system seemed able to see that "change is the constant." The people she most needed to help move the institution forward at times became the biggest obstacles to bringing about change.

A new kind of epoch

During the epochs of the "information age" and the "knowledge age," the role of the dean was relatively well-defined. Academic management and supervision were sufficient for the job. Deans who currently serve in educational institutions find themselves in an old role (a "medieval" role, as someone described it) in a new and different age. In an epoch of seismic change, the "transformation age," deans need to function as educational *leaders* who can not only maintain institutional integrity, but be the agents of change who will actually help transform their institutions. According to Dale W. Lick, former university president and professor, "Transformation means a fundamental change in condition, nature, or function." (1) It is no longer a matter of doing the same things differently---it's a matter of doing different things.

Deans appreciate, if not always understand, the kinds of changes they must give attention to, and, the multiple levels those changes impact. Beyond programmatic changes, the fundamental changes that have seismic impact on their institutions include technological, communicative, cultural, and economic. Each impacts on multiple levels, and includes challenges to fundamental questions about mission, relationships, outcomes, the nature and value of theological education, identity, and institutional viability. The challenge is that a new epoch requires a new kind of dean.



A new kind of dean

In an epoch where the speed, intensity, and magnitude of external changes are overwhelming many theological education institutions, deans will need to redefine the role of chief academic officer. In the age of transformational change, deans need to expand their functions beyond managerial and programmatic competencies. One of the greatest needs of theological schools is that of the dean as academic leader, not manager.

In their roles as institutional leaders, deans may serve four functions related to change in their institutions:

Dean as steward of change. The most traditional role of the dean in the institution is that of the steward of change. In this role a dean carries out the changes that are the initiatives from points of authority in the system: trustees, the office of the president, accrediting agencies, internal assessment or review groups, etc. This role consists of primarily administrative and

supervisory functions. In some contexts the dean must also engage in evaluation, quality control, and compliance assurance activities. One aspect of this role is that the dean also becomes a target of change in that she or he must respond to the requirements placed on the office and its tasks.

Dean as advocate of change. In this role the dean is in the position of supporting institutional change but with no authority to make the necessary changes happen. The authority for the changes will reside in other agents (the board of trustees, departments, staff persons, the president, program leaders, committees, etc.). With no authority, the dean's advocacy will have effect to the extent he or she has influence in the system.

Dean as sponsor of change. In the role of sponsor of change a dean holds legitimate authority to advocate and lead institutional, programmatic, and personnel changes. Depending on the context and culture, the scope of this authority may be limited. In some contexts authority may not automatically include the influence necessary to help make changes happen. In other contexts, a lack of support from key influencers, or persons in authority, will limit the capacity of a dean to function as sponsor of change.

Dean as agent of transformative change. This is the new and emerging function of the academic leader, one who goes beyond management and supervision for maintaining existing systems, structures and cultures. Doing the same old thing, only better or more efficiently, is no longer a sufficient function of the academic dean. Deans as educational leaders at institutions facing the challenges in the *transformation age* must be agents of transformative change who engage their institutions in redefining the nature of theological education, its institutions, its models, and, its new place in the context of higher education, religious life, and society.

Depending on the context, a dean may be in more than one of these roles. In the liminal age of transformative change, theological schools need deans who can lead their institutions from what they have been to what they will need to become.

For reflection:

- With which of the four functions are you most personally comfortable? Steward, advocate, sponsor, or agent?
- Which of the four roles has been the traditional function of the dean in your school?
- Which of the four roles does your institution most need of a dean at this time?
- The four roles are not mutually exclusive. Can you identify to what extent you fill each role?
- Are the roles that define your function related to change dictated, limited, or supported in your school by its culture? Policies? Structure?
- Have you made a definitive shift from one role to another related to change in your context?

(1) Dale W. Lick, "Leadership and Change," in R. M. Diamond, ed. *Field Guide to Academic*

Leadership. A publication of the National Academy for Academic Leadership. Jossey-Bass, 2002, p. 29.

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