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9 Ways to Dean like a Pirate

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I have a couple of friends who are really into "Talk Like a Pirate Day" (September 19 in case you're wondering). One dresses up like a pirate for the day (in Johnny Depp "Pirates of the Caribbean" style) and plays the part to the hilt, sometimes visiting local elementary schools to the delight, and confusion, of children. I think there may be some things theological school deans can learn from pirates. While pillaging and looting to help offset the academic administrative budget may not be recommended, here are nine ways you can dean like a pirate:



Look the part and act the part. Many deans suffer from the "Impostor Syndrome" when they first take the job. Some humbler souls have difficulty being "first among equals" with faculty colleagues. Some feel uneasy with the deference given to them that comes with the office. It is worth remembering, however, that deans are academic leaders, and leadership has more to do with what the system needs of its leader and less about any insecurities one may have about playing the role. And, it can't hurt to literally dress the part of the office, which can call for gravitas and decorum. One faculty member was overheard saying of his dean, "I never can tell if he's working or going to the gym."

Treat Faculty as Mateys, but don't forget you're the First Mate. Faculty members are smart, some are experts in their field, but they tend not to be "smart" about the larger picture of the institution: how the organization works, the minutia of accreditation issues, the critical roles played by non-teaching and support staff, or the interrelated, the necessary expedience of political relationships, and the interconnected nature of the curriculum and its impact on everything from student recruitment and retention to the economics of the institution. On occasion, a faculty member will forget they are also employees of the institution, believing themselves to be "free agents." One dean noted of his Faculty, "Individually, they're some of the smartest people around, but in times of high anxiety, their collective IQ can drop 20 points." Treat Faculty with respect, strive to remove obstacles to their work of scholarship and teaching, but accept the liability that comes with needing to be liked above being an effective educational leader. Remember what author Henry Cloud says to leaders, "You are ridiculously in charge."

Prepare for turbulent waters and storms. Theological schools are institutions that are sensitive to shifts in the larger environment. It is apropos they've been called the canaries in the mine shaft of higher education. For deans, the job can sometimes feel like going from one

small crisis to another, but you can also count on facing at least one major storm during your tenure--institutional financial distress, employee or faculty dismissals, faculty revolts, lawsuits, accreditation notations, conflicts with the President and/or Board members, all loom just over the horizon. Anticipate the storms. You'll not only need to manage yourself, but also provide leadership for others in the system to weather the storm.

Keep things shipshape. Quality control, accreditation compliance, and maintaining institutional, programmatic and personal integrity all fall within the dean's charge. Effective educational leaders know that everything matters--"small details" are ignored at your peril. Every accommodation to a plea for exemption from policy has an unintended consequence. Keeping things shipshape is not sexy, and no one will thank you for it. But when its neglect starts causing problems, you'll be the one at whom people point fingers, and rightly so.

Keep the wind in your institutional sails. Every once in a while, get up on the crow's nest and look out over the horizon to gain perspective. Suck in a lungful of sea air to clear your mind and let the vista inspire you. Invest in your own professional development as dean, and insist on a faculty culture and ethos that values professional development of your teaching faculty and of your staff. At the end of the decade the theological institutions that will be thriving will be the ones who have been imaginative enough to change, fleet enough to do so, and who have had the visionary leaders to get them there.

Seek a safe harbor during attacks and times of stress. During your tenure as dean you can count on at least one instance of being under attack. Get a coach or support system to help you manage stress and anxiety. Stay close to your president, who should be an ally. Remember that 90% of the problems you'll face will not about you personally, they just come with the job. Maintain a real life, cultivate your spirituality, practice grace.

The Plank. Deans need to guard against toxic attitudes and behaviors from staff and Faculty for the welfare of the school. It is likely that during your tenure you'll need to address personnel issues that call for dismissal of underfunctioning, underperforming, misfit, insubordinate, or acting out staff or faculty members. When things get to the point where a parting of ways becomes the right thing to do, deans need to accept it's appropriate to help someone walk the plank.

Check your compass often. In the midst of the daily barrage of administrivia to which deans must give attention, it's important to check your compass to make sure you're headed in the right direction. Will all your activities, plans, and meetings help move you toward your institutional goals? Does your curriculum help your students move in the right vocational direction? Do your metrics provide the correct waypoints to get you where you are going? Is your institution headed in the right direction?

Create your treasure map. Working for mere survival is not enough, though that can seem to fill most days for an institution under duress. But people need something higher than keeping the boat afloat to get up in the morning. Everyone on board needs to have a sense of purpose.

What is the ultimate goal worth pursuing for your school? Where does your treasure lie? Keeping the mission and vision of the school before your mates will help everyone row in the same direction.

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