



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Kinds of Problems Deans Solve

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Theological School Deans

August 02, 2013

Tags: leadership | institutional development | administration

Two years into my deanship a friend asked how the job was going: "Is it between '10. The best job ever;' or, '6. I'd rather shoot my eye out with a nail gun;' and '1. I'm recommending my worst enemy for this job.?' " I responded that most days, it was a 7: "It's a challenge." Two years into the deanship I was still in the problem-solving stage. Not that problem-solving ever ends for deans. To say it's a challenge is not a bad thing in that I'm the kind of person attracted to challenges and enjoys solving problems. I've discovered that's not true for all deans. The function of resident problem-solver can come as a surprise to entering deans. For one thing, the number and types of problems deans are called upon to "solve" are myriad:

- Personnel problems: even in schools fortunate enough to have a strong HR office, the dean will be involved in sensitive, complex, and often messy personnel issues. One dean said, "I was surprised by the number of hours I need to spend with the seminary lawyer over personnel and employment issues."
- Motivational: given the pressure points theological schools are facing (as one person said, "theological education is not a growth industry") deans will often be called upon to be the voice for a hopeful future, an encourager, a cheerleader, and to set the tone for a positive work environment.
- Administrative: allocation of resources, balancing schedules and budgets, granting favor, saying, "No" (or "Maybe later."), are day to day concerns. While Presidents set institutional vision and direction, deans become stewards of strategies and resources. Deans are implementors, they function more like lieutenants than generals.

- Academic: this category underscores that deans are EDUCATIONAL leaders. They must solve problems related to degree standards; curricular review, assessment, and revision; educational effectiveness; teaching performances; academic probation; accreditation compliance, achieving curricular integration, etc. Of all the institutional problems at the school, this one more than any "belongs" to the dean.
- Organizational: I contend that schools, including theological schools, are chronically anxious organizations. They are STRUCTURED for it. Consequently, schools are organized to resist change (ironic in an educational institution, but, that is its organizational nature). The major problem deans solve organizationally is figuring out how to push against inertia.

The kinds of problems deans solve is one thing, HOW to solve those problems is another. Theological schools all have the same problems, to one extent or another. This is because theological schools are systems of a kind with problems endemic to that system. However, each dean must solve his or her own problems for his situation and her context. That is a product of personality and capacity, as well as imagination, hard thinking, and sometimes, force of will. It's why it matters that YOU are the dean.

Here are some hints as to HOW to solve problems:

- There rarely is a perfect solution to a problem. Sometimes, you just need to make a decision; sometimes just making a decision is the solution to a problem. Often, as dean, it's YOUR job to make the decision--just do so.
- Think long-term when solving a problem. What is expedient is not always effective in the long run.
- Never underestimate the power of the baser motivations. Fear, greed, self-preservation, pain-avoidance, revenge, often feed the nature of a problem. Use them to solve the impasse.
- For some things, a higher level of incentives yields lower performance. This seems to be especially true with Faculty. Find out what really motivates your faculty members (hint: it's usually not higher salaries).
- Try to solve a problem once. When I served on a key committee at my school I discovered that the committee was solving the same problem over and over. When I became dean I resolved to "fix" as many problems only once. That's where a policy manual becomes a godsend and not a burden. When a problem arose, we determined the best solution, and if appropriate drafted either a policy or a procedure for the next time the problem arose.
- If you can't immediately change the problem, change yourself. Albert Einstein said "You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it." Often a solution to the problem happens when we change our thinking, or, we change the way we feel about it.
- When solving a problem, solve the PROBLEM. It's worth the time to discern what THE problem actually is. As my engineer son says, "Solve the PROBLEM, not something else." Good advice.
- Discern if the problem is YOUR problem. Deans are "convenient" and often are asked to solve other people's problems. If the problem belongs to someone else, don't

overfunction---allow others the joy of solving their own problems.

- Accept that not all problems need to be solved. Sometimes, problems serve a purpose in chronically anxious system. Solving one problem sometimes just creates another three.

Seminaries are institutions caught in the perfect storm of change: an economic model that is no longer viable; the fast-paced fundamental changes in the field of education; the upheaval in the landscape of institutionalized religion (e.g., congregations, denominations). That means deans will ALWAYS have problems to solve. And while some problems are unsolvable, deans will be called to address those nevertheless. I'm of the opinion the schools that will survive will be those fleet enough to change and morph their models and forms while maintaining their identity and mission. That's no small feat, one that will require imagination and courage in solving, or redefining, our problems. Deans, of course, will be at the center of it all.

<https://wabash.center/2013/08/the-kinds-of-problems-deans-solve/>