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What Niccolo Machiavelli Can Teach Deans

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Blog Series: Theological School Deans

September 04, 2012

Tags: leadership | institutional change | institutional development

The relationship of the dean with faculty does not have to be adversarial, but it occasionally can be. Edwin Friedman wrote, “Living with crisis is a major part of leaders’ lives. The crises come in two major varieties: (1) those that are not of their own making but are imposed on them from outside or within the system; and (2) those that are actually triggered by the leaders through doing precisely what they should be doing.” (*A Failure of Nerve*, p. 27). In other words, if a dean isn’t causing trouble, he or she is probably not doing a good job.

I think theological school deans can learn a thing or two from Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), the founder of political science, ambassador, chief secretary of Florence, and author of *The Prince*. He was an early conceptualizer of the function of leadership. Whether one is comfortable with all his ideas of power, authority, and the role of the ruler (he encourages leaders to be unapologetically ruthless in achieving their goals) many of his insights can be helpful to deans and other leaders. For one thing, he reminds us of the amorality of the leadership function, there is no such thing as “good” or “bad” leadership, only “ineffective” or “effective” leadership.

Below are quotes from *The Prince*, along with some modern-day (playful) interpretations for their application to the deanship.

“When you introduce a new order of things, those hostile to you will have their reasons to

attack you and your defenders will not be enthusiastic to defend you.”

The more anxious persons in the system always have more energy. There is always a silent majority who, if they defect in place, will fail to prevent the reactive parts of the system from exerting their willfulness. Deans must muster the will to see their plans and visions through despite criticism and resistance. You don't need 100% support to move ahead.

“If you want to introduce a new order of things, praying and relying on others does not work. You should only rely on yourself and use force. It might be easy to persuade people, but to keep them persuaded, you might have to use force. You must be able to get the multitude of people to believe.”

The leadership function of deans requires the exertion of vision and will. Will is not the same thing as willfulness. Staying in touch with people and staying the course are vital. This requires personal conviction and courage.

“People hurt others out of fear or hatred.”

Questioning people's motives is not that helpful to understanding what is really going on. Anybody can get anxious, reactive, and get crazy and act out—even good people. Being smart does not ensure immunity to anxiety.

“A prince selected among the nobles to be prince has difficulty because the other nobles consider themselves equal to the prince. Such a prince has difficulty in ruling the nobles.”

Being called to be dean out of the faculty has unique challenges. The position of Leader in the system cannot be assigned. It is a question of position and differentiation of self. The person in the leadership position will always be the focus of anxiety in the system. Being in the dean's position may mean that your colleagues will no longer be your friends.

“Just being praiseworthy makes you allow evil things in reality to destroy you. It should appear that a wise prince has all the good qualities one expects of him and none of the bad qualities. However human nature prevents anyone to be perfect”.

The deanship isn't for sissies or for those who need to be liked by everyone. Being “a nice guy” does not equate to being an effective dean. There is no such thing as the perfect leader—the only thing that matters is being effective in providing the leadership functions that the system requires of the dean. Knowing when it is appropriate and necessary to be ruthless for the sake of the system (over against the needs, desires or benefit of individuals) is critical to effective leadership.

“A wise prince understands that being considered mean is better than being considered liberal. By being mean, you save enough to be able to defend your country and its people. You are also able to engage in large enterprises without taxing your people”.

Interpretation: Machiavelli is asking, “Would you rather be liked or would you rather be effective?”

“Avoid any attempts to persuade an adversary that she is wrong. No matter what she has done, no matter how offensive you find it, you must remember she believes that it is justified. Her

response to attempts to show her that she is wrong will only reinforce her position.”

Getting into a battle of wills is futile. Others in the system will not be able to see things from the perspective of the dean. Your vantage point is different, and your responsibility is to the welfare of the system first, to individuals in the system only second.

“Never assume you have been forgiven.”

A prince can become hated by doing good or bad works. A prince can become loved by doing good or bad works.

Sometimes, you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. Or, as Friedman said, “No self-differentiated stance goes unpunished.” Leadership is not about making the “right” decision—sometimes there is not “right” decision. The most important factor is what you do and how you function after you make a decision.

Disarming people shows people you distrust them. This offends them and leads to hating you. If you disarm your people, you have to rely on mercenaries, which is useless.

An effective dean is not threatened by the competence and expertise of others. In fact, differentiated leadership strives to ensure health, growth, maturity, and mutual interdependence on the part of others. Effective deans invest in faculty development. A seminary is only as good as its faculty.

A prince that wins over those that initially have a bad impression of him, wins over very strong supporters.

The effective dean is not threatened by criticism because he or she knows that criticism is a form of pursuit. Staying connected with the pursuers can help them become cheerleaders over time.

Those unhappy with the previous government, helping you to become prince, do not make great friends. They do not necessarily love you, they just did not like the previous government. It is better to make friends with those content in the current government.

Don’t believe everything you hear about the previous dean. The differentiated leader knows not to take things personally—neither praise nor criticism. Reactive people will always be reactive. It’s more important to pay attention to emotional process than to the content of the message.

The way you run your state that leads to success, does not mean that you should always use the same ways under all future circumstances as well. Caution and patience might for example lead to success, but when times and circumstances change, caution and patience might then lead to failure.

Deans cultivate resilience in themselves to help ensure that their systems can respond to anxiety with imagination and creativity as opposed to getting stuck in ineffective reactivity and ineffective repertoires.

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