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Five Essential Functions of the Dean

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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I agree with Stephen Graham's assertion that "Right now, theological schools need leaders, not just managers." (1). He wrote, "Theological schools need leaders who are willing to name the changes that have taken place, anticipate the changes to come, and lead their schools into the path that will enable them to be faithful to their heritages and stories and also to engage the new conditions that face them." (2).

What may not be clear in the wake of that perspective is that theological school deans need to be educational leaders. Meaning, the position they hold in a theological school, and the function of leadership called for, requires that they think and lead educationally as much as theologically. The key concept here is that leadership is always a function of the system, much less so a function of personality.

Effective leaders are those who provide the functions their systems need of them. The consistent counter-intuitive reality is that effective schools have strong leaders—conversely, it is not always the case that strong leaders have effective schools. The question then, is, "What function will I need to provide to be an effective dean?"

The literature of educational leadership has identified five essential functions of leaders in educational institutions. While the list has appeared in different forms over the years, basically, they are:

1. Having a vision and communicating it well
2. Articulating goals and identifying strategies
3. Creating an adaptive culture open to change
4. Monitoring progress
5. Providing necessary interventions. (3)

All educational leaders need to provide those essential functions, but, there's no one best way to provide them. WHAT a dean, as educational leader, needs to provide is clear; HOW a particular dean chooses to go about it is a product of both context and personality.

The challenge of the complex nature of the job, with its multi-faceted dimensions, calls for an astonishing wide-ranging skills set: from interpersonal relational skills to high-level analytical and intuitive-interpretive skills. Deans need to cultivate and apply a wide repertoire of cognitive styles in order to carry out the job, sometimes, in the course of a single day! They need often to switch from abstract, symbolic perspectives to a concrete, realistic perspective from one moment to the next. They may start the day with internal vision-casting in a Zen-like state while driving to the office, only to be engulfed in managerial problem-solving within twenty minutes of sitting at the desk, then, end the day dealing with interpersonal conflicts in the midst of emotional reactivity.

Effective deans do well to remember that in the midst of the urgency and the press of the daily triage, there are only five functions that will ultimately determine their effectiveness. Five things make the difference, for they are the essential functions that the school, as a system, needs of its academic leader. It is not much of an overstatement to say that, at the end of the day, all else is distraction. In fact, what dysfunctional systems are very good at is distracting its leader from focusing on and providing the essential functions!

To what extent are you providing the five essential educational functions of a dean?
What things distract you from investing time, thought, and effort on the five essential functions?
Are you stronger in providing one function over others? Which functions do you need to work on increasing your competence?
Dysfunctional systems are adept at sabotaging a leader's focus on the five functions. Are you able to identify ways your system and context inhibits your effectiveness in one or more of the five essential functions?

(1) (C(H)AOS Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Schools. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, p. 71

(2) Ibid.

(3) See for example Rutherford, W. L. "School Principals as Effective Leaders," Phi Delta Kappan 67 (1985): 31-34.

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