



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Dean in the System

Rebecca Slough, *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*

Blog Series: Theological School Deans

May 03, 2012

Tags: Leadership and Faculty Development | teaching contexts | vocation

When some members of the first Deans Colloquy group were together this past January, we spent a part of one day reviewing basic principles of systems theory. Two themes, in particular, that we discussed brought new clarity to my work in this season of deep change in my school: 1) cultures and

the systems they produce mediate the emotional realities of processes; and 2) anxious systems will structure its processes to inhibit effectiveness (e.g. change). It's easy to see how anxious systems remain immature (adolescent) systems. They keep forming people who are not mature in their perspectives or capacities for growing into members of an organization. As a result they are unable to participate helpfully in the hard work of change for the common good of the school, in its organizational health, or in adapting its curricular programs.

I wonder about my role as the dean in leading the faculty beyond the chronic state of anxiety toward greater maturity in dealing with the critical issues that are before our school. I must first be clear that most individual members of my faculty and our administration are mature adults and act accordingly a high percentage of the time. But as an organization, we don't consistently act at the best of our maturity. The ability to trust is not evenly distributed among faculty members. Fears about being cheated (especially when it comes to getting "our fair share" of the curricular offerings) rise quickly. We become defensive and often feel that our contributions are not appreciated. We do not always communicate our intentions and values clearly or with transparency. When we are stressed, angry, or afraid we lose our capacities for

imagination and playfulness. We are more likely to withdraw from each other rather than draw together seeking the synergy needed for creating new processes or programs.

Within the functions of my role as dean at this time in my school, what is within my purview in terms of administrative organization and faculty development that ever so slowly draw the organization toward maturity? What are the commitments I need to make to serve the school mission, its programs, and its people effectively?

- I can commit to tending my own maturity as a human being and as a Christian –
 - living into the goodness and brokenness of all people and things of this world;
 - acknowledging the “belovedness” of all people, even when they are acting like jerks and causing damage (this is sort of like loving my enemies);
 - trusting that failure, suffering, and evil should not make us afraid;
 - trusting that new life in people, organizations, and communities is always possible though it will inevitably be borne out of some level of pain;
 - acknowledging that wise, compassionate, truthful, collaborative, and fearless leadership is essential in every human community – leadership is never optional.
- I can commit to behavior that is appropriately protective of my health and well-being, but not defensive, entitled, or self-serving.
- I can commit to a maturing style of leadership that sets appropriate boundaries on the nature of my responsibility, influence, and work; I cannot save my organization.
- I can commit to saying I’m wrong when I am and apologizing when I have damaged the bond of trust with anyone through my actions that are hurtful.
- I can commit to care about the right things, not every little thing, and to keep my own reactive anxiety or crankiness in check.
- I can commit to value, draw out, guide, and free the gifts and skills of the people in my stewarding care to strengthen our organization and the mission that guides our work.
- I can commit to collaboration, taking counsel from, and discerning with colleagues inside the organization and those outside of it.
- I can commit to calling those in my stewarding care to take responsibility for their views, their choices, their behavior, and their work; the organization will not grow toward maturity if I am rescuing or covering for people’s irresponsibility. This will likely mean that some things will inevitably fall apart.
- I can commit to staying clear about my capacities for doing the dean’s work and to leaving the office when the school needs a kind of leadership that I am not capable of providing for whatever reason. I will not hold on to the position for my own sake or to protect my interests. The work and the office are not about me.

Even as I post this blog, I am in the midst of several “issues” that are testing these commitments. As the academic year draws to a close and everyone’s anxiety increases, I find it harder to keep them in my mind and heart. (I had actually forgotten a couple of them.) But it is helpful to post this list in a place that I can see regularly to encourage me to live into the role I have accepted with clearer purpose and to carry out my (and only my) responsibilities.

What commitments have you found helpful in encouraging organizational maturity in your school?

<https://wabash.center/2012/05/the-dean-in-the-system/>