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Introducing the “Deans’ Perspective”: A Forum for Discussion of Issues in Academic Leadership

by Krishna S. Dhir, Feature Editor

I am delighted that *Decision Line* is initiating a feature column entitled “Deans’ Perspective,” and I am honored to be its first feature editor. It is my hope that this column will become a thriving forum for dialogue among our readers on issues pertaining to academic leadership. This forum offers an opportunity to administrators and faculty members alike to speak their minds on any and all aspects of the various leadership issues confronting them. Please put your thoughts on paper and send them to me to be shared with our readership. In this first article of the column I would like to offer some rambling thoughts in the hope that they would trigger reactions and start contributions from you, the reader.

More often than not, first-time deans and department chairs are recruited from the faculty ranks. However, recruitment of deans from the corporate world and government, including armed forces, is not uncommon. Do deans from faculty ranks differ from those chosen from non-academic ranks? Does ex-academic experience give deans a different perspective from those of academics who become deans? We would like to hear from academic leaders with a corporate history.

When offered the leadership position of a business program for the first time, I was an associate professor. I recall consulting my friends—faculty (and DSI!) members all, not one dean among them—on whether I should take on such an administrative challenge. “How thick is your skin?” they asked. I was not new to the challenge of leadership. I had already been in the corporate world for about 13 years, both in the middle and senior hierarchical levels, in multinational corporations in the U.S. and Switzerland. But, indeed, I was new to academic leadership. I was told that by one estimate the average tenure of a business

school dean in office was a little over two years. I knew that Dean H.J. Zoffer had already completed nearly a quarter century in office at the University of Pittsburgh’s Katz Graduate School of Business; thus, by inference, I came to the conclusion that there were many deans who had lasted only a few months—a frightening thought! I attended the AACSB’s New Deans’ Seminar with the class of 1992. One grim piece of advice I received was, “Do not expect to make friends.” As years passed, I was glad and thankful for having attended this seminar. Fortunately, I also made many friends. The learning, nevertheless, was on the job.

Very few first-time deans or department chairs come to their new jobs with adequate training or understanding of the challenges that await them. Some decide to stay on and make a career of it, either at the same school or at a different school; others make their contribution and return to the faculty ranks. Whether they stay or return, all become wiser. This wisdom we would like to capture in these columns in future issues. Are you currently serving as a dean, or have you done so in the past? If you are serving, or have served, as a department chair, what lessons or insights would you share with those just starting out? Or, as a faculty member, you no doubt have some insights that would benefit administrators. Perhaps you would like to share these with other *Decision Line* readers.

On January 25, 1994, the Pew Higher Education Roundtable published a document that stated, “The changes most important to higher education are those that are external to it. What is new is the use of societal demand—in the American context, market forces—to reshape the academy. The danger is that colleges and universities have become less relevant to society pre-



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cisely because they have yet to understand the new demands being placed upon them." This statement by any measure is an alarming indictment of institutions of higher learning—a community of learning, at that! Could this really be true? Are we so out of tune with our environment as to not understand the demands being placed upon us? Also, Dean Lee D. Dahringer of Loyola College of Maryland asks, "Even if we do understand the demands, must we always respond?" (Dahringer, 2003). Are there circumstances that justify not responding?

Six long years later in 2000, Dean George E. Stevens of Kent State University was lamenting that business schools, suffering from internal inertia, were slow to adapt to external change that was occurring at a rapid pace—so rapid that we in the academy were already suffering from Toffleresque future shock, indeed, out of touch with the needs of our stakeholders. In the meantime, society has continued to question the relevancy of the education provided by institutions of higher education and to demand evidence of value creation. Dissatisfied legislatures have not been shy to cut higher education funding. Business schools are no longer the cash cows they once were (Stevens, 2000). But who said academic leadership was easy?

Dean Stevens reminds us, "Academic leadership is the single most important issue facing higher education and management education as we approach the 21st century" (Stevens, 2000). But we are a community of scholars and learners! Why should leadership be an issue in a community of learners? Why should a community of scholars find difficulty in exercising leadership? Dean Dahringer suggests that a slightly different perspective might be that precisely because we are business scholars, not business practitioners, we would expect to have difficulty in exercising leadership (Dahringer, 2003). What is your opinion? What aspects of the external environment of a business school make leadership a challenge? What are the issues that tax us? Does the difficulty lie in the way we organize or operate our schools? One aspect of the leadership problem may have to do with the metamorphic changes demanded of faculty members when they take on academic leadership in roles such as deans, department chairs, or otherwise. Most faculty members are on probation for about seven years before attaining ten-

ure, and spend an additional seven years or more before being deemed experts enough to be appointed full professors. Is it appropriate to expect that an individual would become an effective administrator on appointment, or at best, after participating in a two or three-day workshop? (Gmelch, 2000).

As a matter of fact, the cultural and philosophical premise of academic leadership is distinct from that of academic scholarship. Gmelch (2000) describes how on becoming a dean, an academician must make the enormous transition from one who works alone on her or his research to one who gets work done through a team or others; from one who works through uninterrupted periods of time on a single project to one who works through fragmented time periods on a number of concurrent projects; from one who enjoys autonomy to one who is accountable to individuals, departments, central administration, students, parents, business community, and society; from one who holds specified blocks of office hours to one who must be accessible all the time; from one who professes to one who persuades. The divergence in the cultural and philosophical orientations between faculty members and deans or department chairs can provide many opportunities for misunderstanding, miscommunications, and conflict. Perhaps you have some insights in these regard to share, or better yet, have questions to ask.

In addition to the deans and department chairs, I would urge faculty members to participate in this column. Academic leadership is as much a responsibility of faculty as it is that of administrators—it is not a domain reserved solely for deans or department chairs. Yet, in my experience, few faculty members familiarize themselves with the challenges of academic leadership in business schools. Concerns of faculty governance do not stop with committee assignments and curricular ownership, but start with creating value for the society and delighting the stakeholders. Different things delight different stakeholders. Dean Dahringer (2003) points out that perhaps there lies a controversial point here: is our task, for example, "student satisfaction," or "student learning?" Faculty members need to prepare themselves for academic leadership no less than the deans.

There are some excellent reading materials available, including the following:

- Austin, M. J., Ahearn, F. L., & English, R. A. (Eds.) (1997). *The professional school dean: Meeting the leadership challenges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bates, A. W. T. (2000). *Managing technological change: Strategies for college and university leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bensimon, E. M., & Neumann, A. (1993). *Redesigning collegiate leadership: Teams and teamwork in higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bright, D. F., & Richards, M. F. (2001). *The academic deanship: Individual careers and institutional roles*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Martin, J., & Samels, J. E. (1997). *First among equals: The role of the chief academic officer*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tucker, A., & Bryan, R. A. (1991). *The academic dean: Dove, dragon and diplomat*. New York: American Council on Education.
- Wolverton, M., & Gmelch, W. H. (2002). *College deans: Leading from within*. Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Oryx Press.

I look forward to hearing from many of you—please do not hesitate to call me. Better yet, send me your papers, essays, or views. Articles may be of any length up to a maximum of about 2,500 words.

References

- Dahringer, L. (2003). Personal communication.
- Gmelch, W. H. (2000). Leadership succession: How new deans take charge and learn the job. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 7(3), 68-87.
- Stevens, G. E. (2000). The art of running a business school in the new millennium: A dean's perspective. *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 65(3), 21-23, 26-28.

Feature Editor Krishna S. Dhir invites papers, essays, or notes for the Deans' Perspective feature column from administrators and faculty members. It is hoped that this column will offer an opportunity to administrators and faculty members alike to speak their minds on any and all aspects of the various leadership issues confronting them.