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Redemption in the Dean's Office

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Abstract

A 2002 management journal presented two perspectives on the experience of serving in the leadership role of a business school dean. One focused on the negative side of power. The second discussed the "squeeze" or exposure of the dean to various stakeholder pressures. This paper provides yet an additional perspective. The dean's role is explored from a framework of theological praxis and language, applying concepts such as hermeneutics, exegesis, and eschatology to the leadership experience. The author concludes that being the dean of a business school is a personal experience filled with successes and failures that collectively shape the moral framework of the office.

> *"Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."*
> *– Sir Winston Churchill*

Introduction

For years I have pondered two articles, authored by Art Bedeian and the other by Joan Gallos (2002), concerning the leadership role of a business dean. Both generated an uncomfortable image. Having served as a dean for nine years, these articles presented perspectives and insights to which I could relate, but the overall impressions seemed inadequate. Generally speaking, deans can choose between becoming deluded and egocentric (*dean's disease*) or feeling conflicted and overwhelmed (*dean's squeeze*). These characterizations of administrators are popular and somewhat truthful, but do not represent the only options.

Leadership literature includes straightforward, transactional models for determining effective and principled leadership (e.g., trait, behavioral, situational, and role theories) and those of a more emotional nature (e.g., service-oriented, transformational, and visionary leadership models). There is a substantial body of work devoted to outcomes associated with various styles of leadership from a follower or organizational perspective, including

discussions about the abuse of power and morally bereft side of leadership and related, unfortunate consequences (c.f., Kets de Vries, 1993; Clements and Washbush, 1999). But, while often inferred, very little is written in management literature about the tremendous personal rewards of principled leadership. Potential positive consequences and outcomes are presented from the perspective of the led, but rarely from the personal experience of the leader. So, while there is no dearth of discussion of leadership outcomes, in most respects, these discussions fail to capture the very personal, introspective, and often positive experience of leading.

This commentary is an attempt to articulate an additional perspective of the personal experience of leadership in the dean's office beyond those expressed by the *dean's disease* and the *dean's squeeze* characterizations, not because what is said is inaccurate, but because it creates only a partial picture. The impression with which one is left reinforces the negative response to that long-standing question pondered by faculty, "Why would anyone want to be a dean?" But the need for values-based leaders and values-based leadership in academic institutions has certainly not diminished, and beyond the immediate rewards that emanate from the power to determine organizational direction and outcomes, there is a personal experience found in both successes and failures that inevitably produce a redemptive disposition.

Dean's Disease

The first of the two articles in the 2002 *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal entitled, "The Dean's Disease: How the Darker Side of Power Manifests Itself in the Office of Dean," is premised upon the well-known wisdom of Lord Acton expressed, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Bedeian writes about the "dark" or morally-compromised side of power in the dean's office, articulating three main causes of what he terms *dean's disease*. The first cause is the control deans have over the nature and allocation of resources. Citing research on dysfunctional personality dynamics (e.g., Janis, 1971; Kets de Vries, 1989, 1991; and Kipnis, 1976), Bedeian concludes that in order to garner favor and thereby resources, faculty often withhold criticism of their deans and engage in ingratiating behaviors. A second cause of dean's disease is an overdeveloped sense of self-confidence and self-importance on the part of the dean and an inability or unwillingness to accept critique. The third reason for dean's disease is that their unchallenged power can lead deans to believe in the inherent morality of their actions. Some questions to ask and remedies to employ are provided by Bedeian as safeguards from the corrupting effects of power.

Dean's Squeeze

In her article, "The Dean's Squeeze: The Myths and Realities of Academic Leadership in the Middle," Gallos analogizes the dean's job as having your feet "firmly planted in two worlds," one within an academic culture and the other in a more corporate, administrative environment (2002, p.175). The academic culture, according to Gallos and the research she cites (c.f., Bergquist, 1992), is driven by the individual needs of faculty and simultaneously emphasizes autonomy and individuality commensurate with consensus and cooperative relationships. These leave very little room for deans to have an impact beyond their ability to "recommend" (p. 179). In addition, administrators at higher levels in the institutional

hierarchy have expectations from the dean, holding him or her responsible for the performance of the college, while they possess the power to make the final decisions. An effective dean is squeezed between nurturing an optimal environment for faculty and their work, while being ever vigilant in managing the boss. When one adds the influence and expectations of such external constituencies as accrediting agencies, government bodies, alumni, and the business community, the implications for staying centered and focused are obvious. One needs to remain malleable in confronting complex roles and relationships many times each day in a seamless fashion. This can be exhausting work and, as Gallos points out, it isn't always appreciated.

Other Alternatives

As a dean, I relate to the worlds presented by both Bedeian and Gallos (2002). From the Bedeian perspective, there have been times upon reflection and after matters have settled that I felt shamed by the arrogance inherent in some of my decisions or behaviors. There are a number of power sources available to deans (e.g., legitimate, reward, coercive, expert) and in times of frustration and stress, it is often more expedient in the moment to resort to unbridled power plays as opposed to the hard work of dialoging, listening, and taking time. The mid-to-long term fallout of this expediency can be costly from a personal and organizational perspective.

Regarding Gallos's *dean's squeeze*, I once found myself inexplicably fighting tears when I heard Warren Bennis, while speaking to a group of business deans at an accreditation conference, describe the dean's work as living the movie "Groundhog Day" where one must face repetitive, daily demands that command great strength and courage. Having developed the coping mechanisms that allow us to live with negative critique about the lack of value in administrative leadership positions, we can find ourselves unprepared emotionally to receive empathy and commendation for work in this role – work that can be demanding, difficult, and underappreciated.

Do I feel powerful? Yes, at times. Do I feel pulled in a million different directions and under-appreciated? Yes, also at times. Yet for all of this, I wake up most days exhilarated and engaged by the work I do. More than any other work in which I have engaged, the dean's job creates tremendous opportunities for impact and self-actualization. College leadership — despite the low regard in which the dean's role is sometimes held — is a privilege that in addition to allowing us to participate in powerful ways to impact organizational life and direction, allows us to regularly identify and overcome our weaknesses and commit to becoming better deans and more principled leaders. Our only responses to the challenges of leadership need not be "fight or flight." They can include an ever-increasing appreciation for and engagement with the complex environments in which we work and for the unlimited opportunities for personal and organizational growth.

Metaphor, Language, and Being a Dean

I was fortunate early in my administrative career to teach courses in organizational behavior, leadership, and organizational design while serving as a department chair. I was also fortunate to be in the midst of a graduate program in ministry while transitioning from chair to interim dean and ultimately, to dean. The two sets of experiences provided an array of *ways of thinking* about the work of the dean and a rich vocabulary for interpreting and

understanding the activities and events of administrative work. Bidden or not, I was forced to move back and forth between theory and praxis on a daily basis — an existential experience that profoundly impacted my perspectives of leadership and administration and led me to the happy conclusion "That stuff really works!"

The rapid and reciprocal travels between teaching theory and engaging in departmental leadership created a natural movement into the reflective leadership process – a process which involves developing the ability to learn from experience. Much of the discussion in the management literature about reflective, principled leadership is tied to Argyris and Schon's (1978) *espoused theory* versus *theory-in-use* and *single* versus *double-loop learning* (e.g., Argyris, 1982; Senge, 2006). Argyris describes a process wherein one interacts with others in a way that shields his or her mental dispositions from challenge, reinforcing a myopic view of the world. *Double-loop learning* occurs when we are able to suspend assumptions and defensiveness, and engage in dialog and discussion about complex and difficult issues, moving toward a new understanding beyond our normal frame of reference. The Center for Creative Leadership has also developed models for the process of "learning to learn from experience" (Bunker and Webb, 1992). In one model, stressful events create a tension that expels us from our comfort zones. To the extent that we are willing to be open to our shortcomings and to new learning or changes that may cause short-term reductions in performance, we can develop new understandings and skills. Moving from classroom discussions on reflective leadership, power, conflict, organizational design, and other related topics to the department chair's office (where I was confronted by frequent challenges to my assumptions and, at times, competence) created a unique and worthwhile learning experience. In a useful way, these challenges were depersonalized by the reference to theory and became, instead, personal case studies and opportunities to apply theory to practice.

In his introduction to <u>Images of Organization</u>, Gareth Morgan (2006) references the images that underlie our interpretations of reality. These images imply a *way of thinking and seeing* that pervades our understanding of the world. Individually, the presentations are partial and limiting, but by seeking additional alternative images, we can reach a broader and deeper understanding of our reality. Certainly, the discussion of multiple management theories worked to provide an array of possible interpretations for daily department chair challenges. Over a six-year period as the department chair, this reflective learning process became increasingly natural — although there were occasions when time was required to learn how to neutralize personal defensiveness.

Ministry and Business Deans

Involvement in a ministry program during the transition time from department chair to dean provided a new language and new metaphors by which I could more completely understand the leadership experience of *deaning*. Understanding effective, principled leadership from a spiritual perspective isn't new. A plethora of essays and articles exist which predominantly focus on spirituality and leadership. Among the early works is Conger's (1994) <u>Spirit at Work: Spirituality in Leadership</u>, a book comprised of eight essays addressing various connections between labor and the spiritual realm. And there are certainly many links between ministry and Robert Greenleaf's (1996) "servant leader" — a leader who manages his own ego and transforms followers to leaders. Today, one may find interest groups in the

Academy of Management (i.e., Management, Spirituality, and Religion) and journals (e.g., the *Journal of Management, Spirituality, and Religion*) devoted solely to these areas of interest. But one may search endlessly without discovering any body of work tying business deans to spirituality and ministry. There are, ostensibly, many reasons why this connection isn't obvious. One reason may be that it rarely occurs to those in the academic community who study leadership and ministry to incorporate the dean's role in those terms.   The often expressed "cross over to the dark side" may more often come to mind.

As the connection between reflective leadership (with its theory and practice dynamic) and practical theology became increasingly apparent, additional concepts and theories (or theologies) emerged which have influenced my position. The structuring of the dean experience within the practical theology and ministerial framework caused discomfort with the limitations the two perspectives presented.

The praxis of ministry is sometimes described as practical theology or the integration of *theology from above* with *theology from below* (Fleischer, 1997). Praxis involves the integration of both theory and practice into a whole and includes moments of reflection as well as action. St. Ignatius referred to this as being a contemplative in the midst of activity (McDermott, 1994). Drawing from Marxist interpretations, theologian David Tracy (1996) formulates conclusions about the need to realize that we don't just understand the world — we shape it. If we are unable or unwilling to integrate our theories (or theologies) in daily life, we risk of not only being perceived as irrelevant, but also as potentially deleterious. The Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan (1990) contributes to the discussion by emphasizing the need to utilize multiple ways of knowing and understanding in order to implement practical theology well. Returning to Gareth Morgan's point, we understand more and we have more options for action when we have multiple frameworks for interpretation. Among the concepts from ministry that may enhance the way we think about the dean's role as well as leadership in general *are hermeneutics, exegesis and eisegesis,* and *eschatology*. The words are strange and foreign in the world of leadership literature, but they do impact the practice of values-based leadership.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is generally defined as the study of the interpretation of texts. It is often used to address the interpretation of the Bible, but the *hermeneutic question* as studied and put forth by Ricoeur is really a philosophy of language (1974). Both Ricoeur and Heidegger believed *man is language* (p. x); that is, text and language are not just something we do, but depict who we are. Language consists of multiple levels of meaning that at the deepest levels reveal the individual as the text. Not only are the language and actions of a dean a text to be interpreted (from a hermeneutical perspective), but the dean as a person *is* a text which can only be understood by moving through multiple levels of meaning. The meaning of what we do is not only obscured by those with whom we work, but is also masked to our own perceptions. If deans don't engage in purposeful and critical reflection, they likely will never understand the meaning of their behaviors or the origins of their actions. This tendency to perceive externally rather than inwardly is a common phenomenon among leaders. As Palmer (1994) indicates, people often rise to leadership positions by virtue of their extroversion, and advance to engage in development that encourages them to

"manage" their external world. Little professional development, however, focuses on the journey inward, particularly in the business world.

Riceour emphasizes our need to conquer the remoteness of the message. As a dean, hermeneutics helps me to understand that the choices I make and the behaviors in which I engage are my text and in an existential way, define who I am. Whether I am involved in a difficult personnel matter, engaged in external fundraising activities, making budget allocation decisions, or performing any other daily task associated with the dean's office, all of these actions are basic statements of who I am as a human being. This is a humbling and sobering insight. Occasionally, when I feel I am relentlessly fielding the conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders and/or in a position where I want to make the expedient yet perhaps thoughtless choice, I remember that this is the text that defines who I am in the world and this realization inspires me to create that small space in which I can infuse thoughtfulness. From a hermeneutical perspective, one of the greatest challenges of leadership is to become a proactive reader of our own text.

Exegesis and Eisegesis

Within the concept of hermeneutics, exegesis and eisegesis are means by which we interpret text — originally biblical passages — but the terms can be used in regard to any text including that of our own behavior as previously discussed. Exegesis means to formulate an understanding based upon thorough analysis. Alternatively, eisegesis refers to generating a conclusion based upon our own preconceptions and history. In many respects, this is an exercise in applying attribution and perception theories. From an organizational behavior perspective, the attribution theory (Mitchell, Green, and Wood, 1981) can be helpful in determining responsibility for problems that occur whereas a perfunctory application of common perceptual biases is helpful in distinguishing misunderstandings and difficult interpersonal situations. I find the greatest value in applying exegetical and eisegetical framing occurs when I am the individual feeling wronged or attacked. One of the dangers luring powerful leaders to jettison principled decisions is the ability to avoid consequences for committing mistakes or rendering poor decisions. Another is the ability to direct unpleasant repercussions upon those who provide personal and critical feedback to the power holder. As Bedeian notes, followers are fearful of providing honest feedback and often for very good reason. An understanding of eisegesis may help to reduce ego defensiveness and serve as a reminder that our preconceptions, histories, and delicate egos are interpreted in a potential inequitable fashion. An exegetical analysis requires utilizing the models and theories of the management discipline to reach a more objective understanding. An awareness of eisegesis allows me to assess all of the facets of the leadership position I occupy. This phenomenon is eloquently stated by Basil the Great, "I have abandoned my life in the town as the occasion of endless troubles, but I have not managed to get rid of myself" (Norris, 1998: 378).

Eschatology

Leadership in all its manifestations has an eschatological quality that may be simply summarized by Truman's famous aphorism, "The buck stops here." Eschatology is, literally, the study of last things. Theologically framed, it is about death, judgment, and resurrection. From an organizational perspective, we might be considering the ends, outcomes, and

judgments of leadership effectiveness. But from a theological perspective, eschatology is also about the present as it treads toward the future (O'Donovan, 1995). It asks the question: How do my current activities define or implicate the end? How is the end transformed by the dynamism of activities that occur on a daily basis? The ultimate meaning of one's leadership is transformed by the manner in which the leader lives the role each day. This applies to deans whether they are making decisions with broad impact or are only allowed to "recommend" (Gallos, p.179). Clearly, deans are held accountable for what is accomplished or not accomplished during their individual terms. In a limited, current context, one significant event may be sufficient to garner praise or condemnation, but the long-term value of the leadership role of the dean (and in an eschatological sense) has as much to do with the series of behaviors exhibited and decisions made over a dean's full term. This can be a powerful way to assess recurring decisions. Bennis refers to the long-term process as requiring great strength and courage. Some days, the decision may be simply showing up at the office. On other occasions, it may be about embracing a far-reaching and unpopular stance because, in the end, it is morally correct. Operating within a theological interpretation, eschatology applied to *deaning* allows us to transcend the trappings of the *dean's disease* or *the dean's squeeze* and allow us to pursue guiltless, principled leadership. Realized eschatology isn't a statement about the future as much as it is a prognosis about how the power of our current acts shapes the future.

The Call of *Deaning*

Max Weber (1958) was among the first to discuss the term *calling* from a capitalist perspective, emphasizing that work and the fulfillment of duty might be among the highest forms of moral activity. Today, it is more common to discuss calling and vocation in regard to occupational and professional choices and, as previously mentioned, there is a large and ever-increasing body of management literature that explores spirituality in the workplace (e.g., Hall D. & Chandler, C., 2005). Even beyond the spirituality literature, research exists which examines the relationship between *calling* and *work* in terms of personal meaning and organizational commitment (e.g., Marko and Klenke, 2005). I have never heard *calling* used to refer to someone in a business dean's role. However, while attempting to identify the ministry role in my life, I was forced to acknowledge that it may be entirely possible to be *called* to the role of business school dean. Fundamentally, *calling* may simply mean that we are doing the work we should be doing — work that fits our interests, personalities, intellects, and occasionally abilities. The Catholic theologian Teilhard du Chardin (1960) espoused the belief that all work may be divine; throughout our lifetimes, we will make choices and decisions that will ultimately shape the direction of ultimate "missions." This directly comports with what Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) state in A Simpler Way, i.e., the world seeks its own order and doesn't require us to dictate organization. Although the process is natural, rarely is it easy. Most of us have invested enormous personal capital trying to decide whether to invest more of ourselves into particular commitments or rather recognize our failures and move forward.

Ultimately, there is nothing essentially better or worse about the leadership role of a dean. While the competency levels and leadership qualities of deans vary, the same is true of department chairs, university presidents, government officials, and business CEOs. No matter the position we occupy, the quality of our work will vary as will the praise — or lack

thereof — bestowed. Deans have no monopoly on these experiences.   We should be doing work that we believe is important, adds value, and allow us to grow and improve, even if we experience failures in the process. From a hermeneutical perspective, we must understand and appreciate that the way we conduct our daily work defines who we are in the world. We should attempt to understand the world around us as distinct from the personal biases we project (exegesis), but we should also acknowledge the role those biases have played in creating the environments and situations in which we find ourselves (eisegesis). Eschatologically speaking, we should intentionally and frequently acknowledge that our life decisions help define both the present and the future. The ability to do so offers daily opportunities for redemption along the way.

Conclusion

My personal experience of occupying the position of dean has been extraordinarily rewarding. I have had to become more adept at (if not more comfortable with) juggling multiple and conflicting goals and making choices that sometimes elicit feelings of animosity. I must regularly self-correct for being defensive under criticism as well as for acting inappropriately, arrogantly, and/or thoughtlessly.   Each day offers new opportunities to learn, grow, and seek redemption for all that I am not and all that I am not able to accomplish. It is glorious and principled work. At a recent AACSB committee meeting of business deans, members were asked to share what they most liked about their leadership roles. After some thought, all I could say was, "I love everything about being a dean!"

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