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Leadership in Academia: *Dean's Disease* - Its Sources, Seductions, and Solutions

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the behavioral dysfunction known colloquially as “dean’s disease” in terms of the classic group of mortal sins to which we are all susceptible and the particular problems faced when serving in an administrative capacity in academia. Practical remedies for those afflictions are suggested based upon the available literature, more specifically Bediean (2002) and Spritzer (2004) as well as the author’s own experiences.

Introduction

Deans and potential dean candidates should be informed about behavioral changes they likely will experience should they accept an administrative appointment. For purposes of this paper, “administration” denotes positions above the rank of faculty with the exception of department chair. The chair is a nurturing role thought to be played by sane people still in touch with the noble altruistic instincts that brought them to academia, whose interests remain parallel to the best impulses of the faculty. This paper seeks to explain the sources and remedies for some symptoms of the moral affliction of “dean’s disease.”

Historical Development and Analysis

The dark side of academia has a long and predominantly oral history. It was Lord Acton, perhaps speaking of academia, who said “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely” – a statement I will not attempt to dispute. It is my purpose to advise potential victims of behaviors they may not have seen in themselves before. Although dean’s disease can be debilitating, it need not be if precautions are taken before accepting the position. First, no one should accept the position of dean or interim dean if he/she is not patient, tactful, goal-oriented, and persevering.

Two modern restatements of the moral decline known as “dean’s disease” are found within the literature. The first, by Bediean (02), contends that deans cross over to the dark side almost immediately after assuming the role, and “develop a sense of superiority that makes it difficult for their faculty to communicate with them” (p. 164). Bediean does not mention the fact that the faculty members also alter their behavior toward the dean. They divide into two

groups: one that approach with dean with proposals that generally involve a raise in pay for the faculty member, and the other that shuns both the dean and the early crowd. While the dean laments that they used to be his/her friends, the metamorphosis is said to begin.

In Bediean's analysis, the symptoms begin when the dean begins to feel some power over the faculty. He contends that the dean's position gives them coercive power consisting of verbal threats, confrontation, and punitive actions, as well as reward power in the forms of salary hikes, teaching assignments, praise, and recognition. Bediean believes that reverent power and expert power may be missing from the wheelhouse of the new administrator although the reasons for this are not part of his analysis. If the dean does not come up with solid ideas and tangible accomplishments, he/she will never wield the power that comes from the respect of the faculty.

In the second stage, the dean develops an overinflated sense of self. The isolation of the dean, coupled with two new peer groups — the council of deans of other colleges — and the CEOs on the advisory board, further skew the perspective of the dean. In the third stage, the pursuit of power becomes an end in itself. The dean begins to engage in exclusively self-serving behavior with little sense of conscience or guilt.

The second diagnosis by Spritzer (04) has been presented to new business deans at AACSB seminars for more than ten years. Spritzer posits a productive period, called the honeymoon, during which the dean and the faculty cooperate in a number of beneficial projects for the college, and achieve substantial successes. As diminishing returns set in, a long period of maintenance is the best possible next scenario. During the downturn in the life cycle, the dean begins to "do things that will result in him or her not being the dean anymore." This is usually as far as the description goes in the new dean's seminar, lest deans flee the seminar with a draft of their resignation letters. Those contemplating a turn at administration deserve to know what these things are. A review of the seven deadly sins will illustrate these things more fully.

The 7 Deadly Sins and a Prescription for Success

Pride is first of the deadly sins, and the most serious. The dean will favor his/her own ideas, and grow defensive about suggestions from the faculty. The dean will favor the faculty that he/she had a hand in hiring. The dean will bask in past accomplishments, and not seek new initiatives. In this mode, it is likely that the dean will resist new mission and strategy initiatives. Pleased with prior successes, the dean is not likely to want to revisit the battlefield that is values, mission, and objectives.

Deans suffering from excessive pride in their own ideas need to create occasions for receiving constructive criticism. New deans often visit each faculty member in their office during the first semester — this should be repeated by all deans at least once a year. A dean who dreads another mission, values, and objectives round needs to keep a journal and document thoughts on changes in these things as they occur to make note of happenings that are inconsistent with mission as well as those that are consistent. Inconsistencies will highlight ideas worthy of being incorporated into the next round and having documentation will make the process of initiating changes easier. Find some interest that you have in common with your most difficult faculty members, and spend some time with them practicing that interest. This is the reason so many deans play golf, and many admit to naming their golf balls.

The next sin is envy. The dean will become interested in conspicuous consumption and will begin to fight with other deans over resources. The provost will regard this as shallow money-grubbing behavior, and will grow hesitant to take seriously any requests for increased funding. The provost also competes with the other deans and the athletic department for private money, and will soon find that many private donors are already marked for the president only. The dean will become discouraged, and then sullen and spiteful.

A dean suffering from excessive envy must stop fighting with other deans over money. Find other sources of money; the provost will value that much more, and good relationships with colleagues are not worth squandering for the small stakes funds available for the taking in Council of Dean's meetings. Set up meetings with business leaders, take a gift, and try not to make it look like an "ask" for money. Instead, pose questions about the college and afterwards take notes about what the person said in order to ascertain the most accurate view of how the community feels about the school. Someone who flunked out of college or went to a rival school carries some baggage, but it probably is not what you think. As they say in development circles, you must find out what is in their heart now (Ostrower 1995, Burnett 2002, Prince & File 1994).

Spend time developing an advisory board. It is absolutely essential to have a large group of community leaders in your corner (Kezar 2006, Taylor 2010, Watson 2015). They must be asked to solve problems and take away memories of the most advanced multi-media extravaganzas you can produce. Join the Chamber of Commerce, roll up your sleeves, and work. Do not let anyone tell you which civic club to join — visit several and choose one that suits your personality. Try to avoid exercising your debating skills about politics or religion.

Lust is the sin of treating others as mere objects for physical pleasure. In this mode, the dean is content to let one committee member do the work of the entire group, burdening that individual, and making a mockery of participatory decision-making. At worst, the dean will pick the faculty member and charge him/her with pre-established findings. After all, the dean may have received his/her own goals from the provost via e-mail.

A dean bothered by lust — treating others as objects by letting a few individuals do all the work — must ponder how perfectly obvious that is going to be especially to those few. It is much better to cultivate teamwork among the faculty than risk having key players leave the institution for a lighter load. Rotate assignments regularly — it keeps the skills of the faculty fresh and may limit oratory about how things were done fifteen years ago.

Consider changing linked assignments. For example, if the university committee member always chairs the college committee, think of involving two people instead of one, on staggered terms. Charging a committee personally is a valuable opportunity to exhibit willingness to listen, and expectations for behavior. At no time should the committee be picked because of its probable outcome, or worse, directed to come up with a particular finding. This is most dangerous when dealing with search committees. If the dean simply doesn't like someone, it should not be known by the committee.

Anger is manifest as hostility and desire for revenge. This is often seen when reading evaluations and mumbling, "I know who this is from." A key piece of dean lore is to convince the faculty that you have the memory of an elephant, and will remember any offense long enough to get even for it. The dean will begin to act like a pit viper shedding its skin. Passive-aggressive tendencies will become less passive and more modus operandi. This affliction can

often be identified by the dean's language which begins to take on more and more shocking turns; when cursing like a sailor, politeness disappears.

A dean seething with anger must learn to cultivate assertiveness rather than aggression. No one will be unhappy if you become clearer in your directives rather than meaner. Remember—revenge is followed closely by retaliation and like a trade war, it will always escalate, not go away.

Other ways to be clearer — especially with faculty within your own college — are bi-weekly newsletters, and the posting of past minutes of all key committees.

One way to tame one's language is to invite other people to meetings — perhaps staff members of student services, information technology, or the fitness center. Only the most boorish dean will curse with guests in the room. Your guests will be pleased not to have been overlooked, not knowing that they might have otherwise been overwhelmed by your language. Patience is, of course, the classic remedy for anger. Treat your secretary as your secret pal and do something nice for him or her, because those closest to you hear the most awful things muttered under your breath.

A dean should use all available opportunities to offer written explanations for non-personnel actions. Far better to stimulate discussion than to hide or appear to hide decisions that affect the college. The minutes of all meetings should be available on line. The authorship of a biweekly newsletter is a burden that pays off abundantly in good will and positive spillover effects. Do not hesitate to send copies to the advisory board, as they primarily just want to feel involved.

Evidence of the sin of gluttony will be found in the girth of the dean or the dean may turn to alcohol or drugs. In an effort to dull anxiety, the narcotic of choice is self-deception (Goleman 2005). Other drivers of corporate narcissism are found in the many works of Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries (1989).

A dean suffering from gluttony will benefit from a regular exercise schedule. This healthy move is the key to keeping stress at bay, and being the dean is going to be stressful. Put the exercise schedule on the calendar and rather than cancelling exercise appointments with yourself to deal with an issue at work, invite the unexpected guest to go with you or make an appointment to see you later. As for the traditional vices that self-medicate stress, strictly heed the advice that you don't have to do everything that makes you feel good; at the very least, don't do it at work or at any place even associated with work. This includes dean's association meetings. The best decisions are made stone cold sober as are the best impressions.

Greed or love of earthly possessions is found in activities such as hoarding the travel budget on the pretense that one more conference will be in the interest of the college. This behavior is easily recognized by the desirability of the location of the conference. Accreditation associations explicitly encourage frequenting their meetings with the message that new standards cannot be fully understood without occasion to discuss them with the dean's only friends: deans at other schools.

Greed is usually manifested by hoarding the travel budget and the best remedy for this is to schedule a vacation a year in advance at one's own expense. Send the chairs to the accreditation meetings; they'll pay more attention to them, and get more out of them. Any

travel funds should be passed to the chairs with directions to apportion them to the most deserving of the productive faculty.

Sloth is found in its purest form: an aversion to work. The formerly anxiety-ridden, now self-deluded dean can finally get some rest in ignoring key deadlines and postponing unpleasant tasks. This is the most dangerous of the seven sins for deans, as these behaviors are impossible to miss. The dean becomes an expert at delegation, and applies this new skill at every turn. The dean will be surrounded by “yes” men and women and not hear a word of discord. Ironically, the dean’s supporters remember saying that the dean would do a good job as soon as he/she learned to delegate. At this point, the dean is doing a bad job by attempting to delegate everything. Of course, only a few of the faculty are engaged sufficiently to cooperate, which galvanizes the rest of the college in an unstable and dangerous behavior known as poor morale.

Sloth is perhaps the most difficult of afflictions, but as it results from a dean feeling sorry for him/herself, it can be conquered by taking control of the dean’s schedule. A dean can be too available to the staff and faculty. Empowering them to solve their own problems will allow you to schedule some creative time which will be productive and energizing. A wise man once said that leadership is the fine art of making people do what you want without making them mad. A dynamic, energetic leader will have the time to do this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, dean’s disease is a real malady which can be effectively circumvented only by continual vigilance and meditation upon the seven deadly sins of deanship. Those who are inclined to seek further guidance of a more spiritual nature will enjoy the work of Clements (2002) and Conger (1994). Of course, some of the challenges of deanship do not result from any moral failing of the dean (Dhir, 2008, Smith 2006). The most difficult problems will be personnel problems. For advice on this, see Gunsalus (2006). For advice on the middle manager problems dealing with the external world expectations, see Gallos (2002, 2008). Those courageous enough to pursue administration will have been warned.

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