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Four Blind Spots Every Dean Needs to Avoid

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One of the biggest liabilities for leaders in any system, including deans, is blind spots. Blind spots can be the result of personal bias, or of having inaccurate or insufficient information. When leaders fail to have a systemic perspective, 360 vision, or a "view from the balcony," all sorts of liabilities and handicaps result. A dean who is not aware of her or his blind spots may experience things a lot messier than they really are, or, perceive things are humming along more smoothly than is actually the case. Unaware of systemic dynamics, deans may tend to blame themselves for things that are not their fault, or, blame unfairly others for things not of their doing. Lacking clear-eyed vision, deans may misinterpret experiences and events they need to address. In any case, blind spots can result in what any leader least desires:



SURPRISES!

Here are four blind spots every dean needs to avoid:

1. Spatial Blind Spots

A dean who suffers from spatial blind spots fails to see the school system as a whole. This is a liability that can be the result of the myopia of the daily administrivia that makes up most of the work week for the academic dean. As persons who lead from the middle, deans need to understand how all parts of the system influence each other---and, the persons in it. Here are signs that you may be experiencing spacial blindness:

- Focusing on what is happening to you but failing to see what is happening elsewhere in the system
- Failing to see what others are experiencing and dealing with in other parts of the system
- Failing to see how academic and curricular decisions (or non-decisions) impacts others in the system
- Failing to see how others' experience impacts your role in the system
- Thinking of persons in terms of stereotypes in the system ("Faculty always . . . ," "Staff are just . . . ," "Trustees never. . . .")
- Taking personally things that are not personal (just because it involves you as the dean, it doesn't mean it's *about* you).

2. Temporal Blind Spots

Temporal blind spots refers to our failure to interpret our context in the arch of its history. We all come into a system at one point in its history. That history provides a narrative arch that informs identity, has shaped a culture, created patterns and habits, and cultivated corporate values over time. It is the explanation to "We've never done it that way before" and the answer to the question "Why do we do it this way?" There are liabilities when deans do not avoid temporal blindness. We may tend to:

- Analyze only the present situation but fail to understand how the past influences current challenges
- Experience the stress of the moment but fail to account for the forces that led to the experience
- Fail to appreciate the history that brought about the present
- Misdiagnose the situation due to a lack of contextual and historical perspective
- Try to fix what doesn't need fixing (and fail to fix what does need fixing).

3. Relational Blind Spots

Relational blind spots refers to a failure to see how the structure, processes, and culture of the system impacts the experience of persons in it. Some liabilities of relational blindness are:

- Failing to see the ways in which the dean exists in systemic relationships with others
- Failing to see our functional position in the system, as opposed to merely the role we play when carrying the title "dean"
- Experiencing personal stress and pain by personalizing relational issues that belong to

the system, or to others in the system

- Failing to appreciate the need to "stay connected" to others in the system beyond those most immediately in the "academic" and "administrative" spheres.

4. Process Blind Spots

Process blind spots refers to the failure to see and understand the organic dynamics that influence the system. Every organization and system comprises a "field," and the dynamics within that field has more influence than we tend to appreciate. Some liabilities deans may face from process blindness can be:

- A failure to differentiate procedure from process
- A failure to see the underlying dynamics that are influencing the way people are functioning
- A failure to take into account dynamics that can block or sabotage initiatives, vision, or plans (homeostasis, reactivity, etc.)
- Failing to address the correct level of change required (structural vs. cultural, administrative vs. programmatic, etc.)
- A failure to understand how the dynamics at work in the field is influencing the dean's own perception and thinking
- Failing to see the system as an integrated whole, as part of an emotional field, and over-compartmentalizing when addressing challenges and problems.

For reflection:

Which of the four blind spots are you most prone to develop?

Do you have practices in place that help you to check for your blind spots?

Are you aware of your personal biases in the four areas which lead to potential blind spots: spatial, temporal, relational, and process?

Which blind spot has been your greatest liability?

Adapted from Berry Oshry, *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

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