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Fixing the Problems of Theological Education

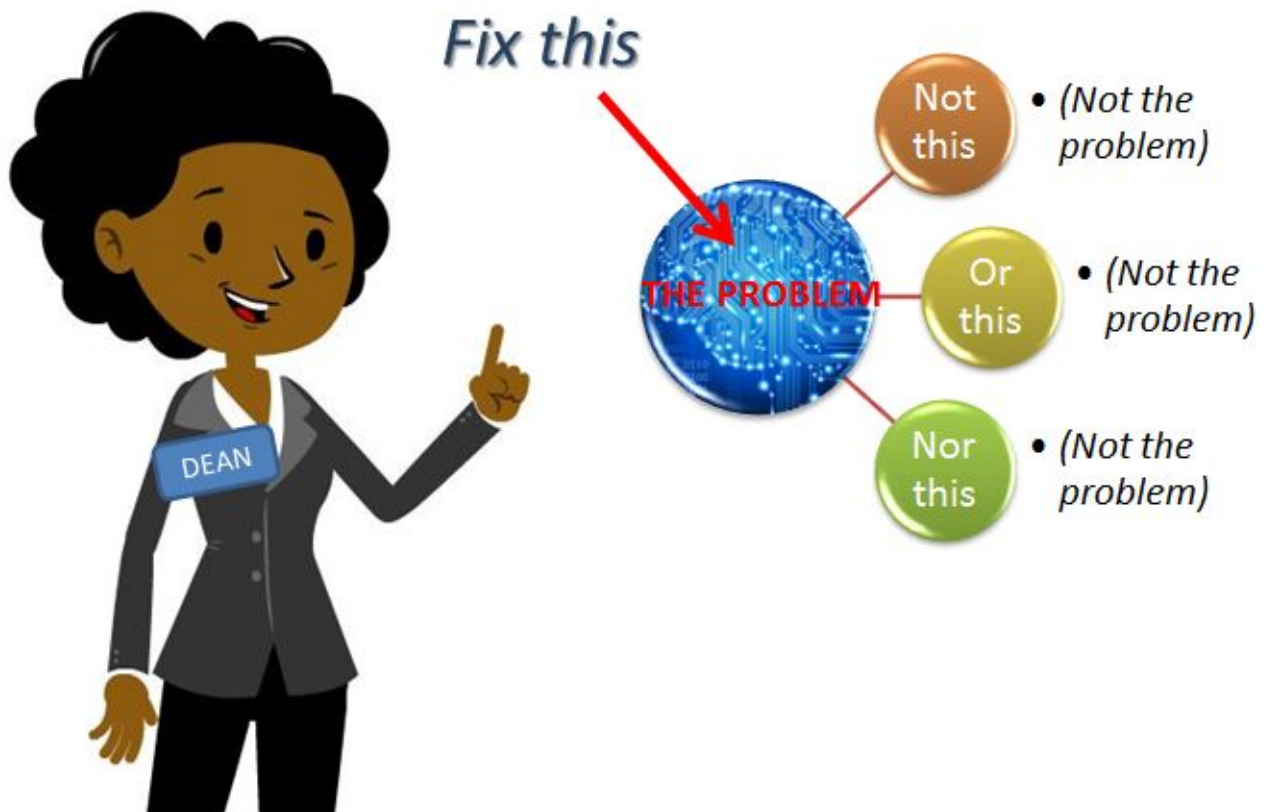
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Blog Series: Theological School Deans

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My engineer son has a mantra: “Fix the *problem*.” As mantras go, it’s a pretty good one. Simple, memorable, intuitive, and to the point. The mantra refers to our tendency to go about addressing issues and problems by doing a lot of things, but none of which will actually fix the *problem*. In short, it is a reminder to focus on the cause and not the symptom, which is a persistent and common tendency.



Simply by virtue of the nature of the job, theological school deans need to be problem solvers. The unprecedented challenges of today's pressures on theological schools - financial, cultural, institutional, educational, and professional - makes this singular capacity arguably one of the important ones for today's deans. It is likely that in theological schools no other person is in the position to be able to address the multiple problems facing the school than the one who leads from the center and is connected to every strand in the complex web of the system.

Recently, in the faculty and staff lounge of a school someone had the ability to "solve the problem." The problem was with the coffee pot. Despite years of reminder memos, signs, and complaints, inevitably the "last person" to use the coffee pot or leave the lounge at the end of the day would not turn off the unit. (First logical problem: how do you know you're the "last person" to leave a room?) This resulted in the roasting of the dregs in the glass coffee pot with its attending burnt-coffee smell and potential fire hazard.

One staff member finally fixed the problem. Rather than try to change people's behavior by attempting to make them more responsible, posting another memo, sending another pleading e-mail to the entire distribution list, or putting up another sign, he got a wall outlet timer, set it to shut off automatically at the end of the day, and plugged in the coffee pot. Problem solved.

It's An Age-old Situation

I recently came across this way of making the point for the need to "fix the problem" (and not something else). You may have seen it:

The Tribal wisdom of the North American Indian, passed on from generation to generation, says that, "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount."

However, in the world of churches, theological schools, and denominational life, more advanced strategies are often employed, such as:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Changing riders.
3. Appointing a committee to study the horse.
4. Arranging to visit other institutions to see how they ride horses.
5. Lowering the standards so that dead horses can be included.
6. Reclassifying the dead horse as living-impaired.
7. Outsourcing the issue of dead horses overseas.
8. Hiring outside consultants to ride the dead horse.
9. Harnessing several dead horses together to increase speed.
10. Providing additional funding and/or training to increase the dead horse's performance.
11. Conducting a survey to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse's performance.
12. Declaring that as the dead horse does not have to be fed, it is less costly, carries lower overhead and therefore contributes substantially more to the bottom line of the mission and budget than do some other horses.
13. Rewriting the expected performance requirements for all horses.
14. Promoting the dead horse to a supervisory position.

A Broken Theological Education Industry?

Many will argue *the problem* is that the traditional ways of theological education are broken - extended years of required study in residence, ineffective pedagogies, and an overfocus on scholarship at the expense of practical wisdom. Others argue the problem is an ivory tower disconnect with the real-world challenges of the Church in the world today, and for others, the problems are an unsustainable business model and declining denominational support. For others, the problem is simply a declining perceived relevance and worth of a theological graduate degree.

In addition to the perceptions of the problem, there are factual evidences of the *challenges* theological schools face including, a changing theological school faculty profile, the failure in cultivating minority leadership, shrinking financial resources, declining enrollments, rising student debt, changing student profiles, accreditation challenges related to changes in higher education, and crushing campus and facilities overhead for a possibly obsolete educational system. To what extent these challenges are actually *problems* may be open to debate. To some extent a dean may approach these as challenges or problems depending on whether she or he is a glass-half-full or half-empty kind of person.

Obstacles to Solving the Problem

As critical as is the function of solving problems to the role of the dean, there are obstacles to the attempt itself. Any dean attempting to bring about innovative and imaginative solutions to problems is rarely met with enthusiastic affirmation. In fact, if anything, denial and sabotage are the common first responses from any system challenged to think and act differently - regardless of how creatively practical the solution and how dire the problem. Meaning, solving complex institutional problems is inherently difficult in ways that have nothing to do with the problems themselves.

Addressing the Six Constraints

- Does this solution satisfy organizational constraints?
- Does this solution satisfy industry constraints?
- Does this solution satisfy social constraints?
- Does this solution satisfy technological constraints?
- Does this solution satisfy school culture constraints?
- Does this solution satisfy personnel constraints?

Yet another challenge is the matter of the obstacles to creative problem-solving deans themselves face. David A. Owens, in *Creative People Must Be Stopped*, identified six ways innovation is killed in organizations. Any dean attempting to bring about innovative solutions to the challenging problems in her or his context will do well to be aware of these innovation killers. They are:

- Individual Constraints (personnel and personalities)
- Industry Constraints (accreditation agencies, Board of Education guidelines)
- Organizational Constraints (old structures, competing silos, cumbersome policies)
- Societal Constraints (loss of prestige, changing student demographics, shrinking denominational support)
- Group Culture Constraints (academic guilds, homeostasis, turf wars, faculty ethos, work environment)
- Technological Constraints (lack of technical expertise or resources)

In complex systems, such as a theological school, deans attempting to address the deeper problems will tend to face multiple constraints that resist their solution. In attempting to solve the problems of the theological school, it will help to (1) identify the *problem*, and (2)

accurately assess the constraints that will inhibit finding the solution. In addition, the most effective deans will persistently ask to what extent they themselves are a constraint to progress and change.

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