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The Dean and Changing the Culture

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One of the most important functions deans provide for their schools is helping to shape the culture of the school. Changing a culture is also one of the most difficult things to do. Steve Denning, author of The Leader's Guide to Radical Management, explained that, "…an organization's culture comprises an interlocking set of goals, roles, processes, values, communications practices, attitudes and assumptions.The elements fit together as an mutually reinforcing system and combine to prevent any attempt to change it." Deans work on changing the culture from the position as second chair leader in their areas of influence. In many ways the position of the first chair leader (e.g., President) facilitates changing the culture easier than it is for the second chair.

As dean I only had influence in the corners of the institution for which I was directly responsible. Being good with boundaries, did not address directly other areas in the institution, though given the interlocking nature of complex organizations, all areas to some extent impacted my office and its work. When I was first chair at the school at which I was Principal, changing the culture was a lot easier. As first chair I set the tone, defined the values, and could make critical decisions to address liabilities. For example, I fired three persons my first year out of the need to establish a culture of accountability. One resource I had in that context was "the power of the paycheck" (something not available to most theological school deans). But firing the under performers only helped the solid people function better. And holding people

accountable ultimately made for a healthier system.

Changing the culture means changing institutional values as well as corporate practices and behaviors. Defining those values that need to be cultivated and embodied through practices, behaviors, attitudes and demeanor is key. Once you identify those, you have to repeat them 1000 times, call them out when you see them, and provide correctives as necessary. The goal is to get the system to the place where everyone knows "the way we do it here," or, "This is what we do and how we do it because this is who we are."

Deans, with their Presidents, must take the lead in changing the culture. They set the tone, communicate expectations, and embody the cultural values they want to inculcate into the system. There will be resistance, but people in the system will follow.

From my perspective, here examples of values and behaviors that make for a healthy culture:

* Increased professionalism: decorum, graciousness, consideration, and effectiveness (one can be "cool" and professional).

* Practices of accountability. This includes a "no excuses" attitude for the things persons have responsibility for getting done. The function of educational assessment fits here.

* Cultivation and practice of transparency. Organizations need to trust their leaders. One can be brutally honest while being gracious.

* The practice of spiritual graces, like piety, hospitality, and humility. This is a critical cultural facet for seminaries preparing persons for ministry. "Formation" of clergy is more caught than taught.

* An expectation and demand for excellence.

* Promote, perpetuate, or reshape the narrative. Leaders need to "tell the story" of the system, often. But, leaders can re-shape and re-interpret the narrative. For example, re-shaping the narrative can involve telling "we used to be...., but now we are...."

The task of theological school deans is varied. Some days, it can seem we're responsible for just about everything in the system. And while these tasks are all important, none will be as far

reaching in impact and significance than in the dean's capacity to shape a school's culture.

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