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The Dean as Positive Deviant

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Albert Einstein said, "Few people are capable of expressing with equanimity opinions which differ from the prejudices of their social environment. Most people are even incapable of forming such opinions."

Every organization does well to avoid the trap of shaping its perception of reality based on self-referencing. By self-referencing I mean believing its own myths, spin, and PR narrative, and, believing that their culture is normative and universal to their field or business. No institution is as great as it tends to believe itself to be; nor, often, is it as bad off as it may think. There are two elements that can provide correctives to the trap of self-referencing. First, there is the practice of rigorous institutional formative assessment that allows data to provide the framework for interpretation and decision-making. The second is less common but has greater potential for positive change and development: the presence of a positive deviant in a position of influence in the organization.

The concept of a positive deviant comes from behavioral scientist Gretchen Spreitzer, clinical professor of management and organizations, and Scott Sonenshein. They define positive deviance as "intentional behaviors that significantly depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways." They explain, "Positive deviance focuses on those extreme cases of excellence when organizations and their members break free from the constraints of norms to conduct honorable behaviors." Spreitzer says, "It has profound effects on the individuals and organizations that partake and benefit from such activities."

By virtue of the position of second chair leader, deans of theological schools can potentially serve as positive deviants in their institutions. Perhaps because deans lead from the center and cast a wide field of influence within the school, they have great potential to function as resident positive deviant than others in the organization. Given the challenges theological schools face in the wake of the furious changes in the field of education and uncertainties in religious life and its institutions in the current age, a resident positive deviant can help a theological school break from the stuckness that leaves it unable to respond to challenges with imagination and resilience.

Spreitzer and Sonenshein posit three criteria for positive deviance: voluntary behaviors; significant departure from the norms of a referent group; and honorable intentions. Positive deviants depart substantially from norms, and by their actions improve organizational functioning by helping its members get beyond the "we've never done it that way" syndrome and the failure of critical self-reflection.

What may be ways deans can be positive deviants in their organizations?

Maintaining the integrity of the mission while reinventing the models and practices that interpret it

Honoring the institutional heritage while moving the institution along its liminal historical trajectory

Helping to articulate the vision for the seminary's next incarnation

Helping the school evaluate conduct (that ought or ought not to occur) with a view to understanding the expectations and assumptions that underlie their practice

Challenging complacency while fostering excellence and accountability

Cultivating appreciation and encouragement for innovation, imagination, and experimentation

Fostering a shift in loyalty from individual preferences, personal predilections and individual needs to the welfare of the school for the benefit of all

Pushing past tendencies of anxiety-motivated desires for safety to taking responsible risk

Expanding beyond a parochial and local perspective to a more global stance

Interpreting the local situation within the larger context (e.g., the seminary is situated in the context and industry of higher education)

Seeing where the institution needs to be in five years and doing now the things needed to get there.

As leaders of influence standing at the center of the organization, deans can provide prophetic vision and strategic direction when they cultivate the stance of resident positive deviant.

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