



A Toolkit for Deans

Dorland, Dianne; and Mosto, Patricia
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014

Book Review

Tags: administration | leadership | Leadership and Faculty Development

Reviewed by: Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Date Reviewed: February 26, 2015

The authors chose a catchy title, but it is difficult to find the “tools” for a dean’s toolkit in the book. This work consists of common sense advice with scenarios and short case studies that illustrate situations, dilemmas, and challenges commonly faced by deans in seven key areas, which make up the chapter divisions: managing self, leading peers, leading and managing supervisees, leading faculty, leading departments, managing students (and their parents), and managing up.

The common sense advice may be helpful to novice deans lacking administrative experience, but will be of little value to seasoned deans, associate deans, and department chairs. For example, the first chapter, on “managing ourselves,” consists of simple, generalized, pragmatic advice on: office management (“You will need to make decisions on what you will delegate, which tasks and responsibilities belong to whom, and when associate deans or senior staff may represent you” [4]); scheduling (“Your staff must also understand that because of the responsibility of the dean’s position, you may be out of the office frequently” [4]); wardrobe (“An appropriate office appearance and staff wardrobe signals respect for the dean’s office and its functions” [4]); and how to handle phone calls, visitors, mail, and filing.

In the scenarios and case studies the authors do well in presenting present difficult situations faced by deans. The examples range from relatively mild procedural and administrative issues to dysfunctional personal and contextual (cultural and systemic) issues. For novice deans, or those considering this job, these will provide a sobering reality check to any romantic notions. However, there is no central or systematic framework that can help a dean discern how to approach the challenges of the office. In other words, there is no discernable theory of practice for the work of the dean, aside from a strong advocacy for collaborative (“shared”) leadership,

a concept for which the authors rely on Pearce and Conger's *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

It is uncertain whether one consistent thread in the scenarios and case studies is a product of the scope of the authors' experience, that of the subjects of their studies, or a reflection on the culture of higher education. That thread is the manner in which solutions for many of the difficult scenarios and cases are found. Many, if not most, of the difficulties are resolved by transferring under-functioning or acting-out faculty and staff to other departments, accommodating underperformers by offering incentives (reduced teaching loads, early retirement options), wishfully waiting out a troubling situation, triangulating provosts and department chairs, or allowing agency to the willful or weak in the system (an invasive human resource department, persons unable to do their work, and so forth). The authors are correct that "In the academic environment, deans provide the delicate but crucial backbone of university decision making" (66), but that requires the practice of courage in leadership in greater measure than most of the scenarios illustrate.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/a-toolkit-for-deans/