



The Changing and Challenging Role of Deans of Schools of Public Health

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Abstract

The average tenure of a Dean is 4.1 years according to The National Jurist Magazine [1]. Today it appears that Deans of Schools of Public Health and/or Health Sciences pass fleetingly on the academic chessboard in higher education institutions. They then return to either to the classroom as a faculty member or disappear into the mist of the academic unknown as an emeritus professor. The challenges and changing roles of Dean's duties and responsibilities in the School of Public Health, College of Health Sciences, or Medical Schools are different today than they were twenty years ago. This paper will focus on what new Deans must understand and do to succeed today in higher education institutions in the 21st century.

Key words: Academic Leadership; Higher Education Institutions; School of Public Health; Colleges of Health Science; Medical School Leadership; Dean's Responsibilities.

Key Characteristics of a Dean Acting as a Change Agent

The Dean as an Entrepreneur

Good leadership is essential to a university's success, especially during a crisis when leaders must emphasize learning, research, and commercialization. The ability to anticipate and imagine the future, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and initiate change are characteristics of a dean as an entrepreneur and create a competitive advantage for the university, especially in a time of challenges that universities are now facing [2]. Many higher education institutions worldwide are facing mounting enrollment challenges and henceforth financial difficulties as a result of increasing competition as changes in student demographics. These challenges place pressures on Deans, Provost and Presidents of universities.

As a former founding Dean of School of Public Health, it appears that Deans must now need to acquire entrepreneurial skills if they want their school or college to be successful and competitive. Deans must now to be willing to take risks and development new programs to keep up with the changing demographics of student populations and new student interests. The newly pointed dean needs to be innovative, risk taking, creative, a change agent, team builder, flexible, and proactive. For a new Dean of a School of Public Health to be effective, he or she needs a strong senior faculty who buys into the vision of the Dean and senior administration. Without this the Dean's tenure will be short.

The next element that the Dean should focus on is to expand their vision to include new academic units such as continuing education, online programs, research centers, and new certificate programs.

Cultivating town and gown relationships

The Dean must be willing to take risks, challenge the status quo and develop partnerships with the community and external organizations. Cultivating town and gown relationships are imperative for the success of any Dean, Provost or President. Today's cities and campus face safety concerned for their citizens, students and faculty. Rising levels of gun violence and unexpected epidemics have proven to be a new major concern for cities and campuses. Therefore, frequent meetings between towns and gown must occur to come to a common understanding and henceforth an action plan to prevent and protect the public from these tragic events.

Having a Vision

An effective Dean must have a good strategic plan. It is our belief that a Dean acting as a change agent must not only have a good strategic plan, but that this plan must start with a focused forward-looking vision that ultimately drives change [3]. Optimally, this vision embraces needs identified at the individual, university, and community level. A strong vision will inspire both the President served by the Dean, and the student and faculty represented by the Dean. A visionary leader will be able to look at the big picture and to decide what needs to occur within their departments to achieve the stated mission and goal. It is crucial that the goal is defined, clear and measurable to the leader and the higher administration. Having a clear and powerful ultimate goal is crucial in motivating people to strive for achieving that goal. It is also important to note that visionary leaders are the ones that sometimes take the road less travelled.

Deans Must Embrace and Enhance Change

It is almost a given that Dean acting as a change agent must embrace change. However, change is not easy, especially at the University level where there is often much resistance to change [4], and an old way of doing things does not easily give way, and even where it does, it may come back [3]. So, to inspire change, a Dean must have a keen awareness of the demographic and cultural diversity embodied by the students, faculty, and within the community in which they serve. Change agents usually do not find themselves in a conducive

environment, whether it is the culture of a school or business. Because of this, there has to be someone pushing for a culture shift. Many times, this is the change that needs to happen for more leaders to be created [5]. Students are no longer expected to succeed or fail based only on their own responsibility. It is now expected that Universities invest in student and academic support systems to be in place to improve student success. There is now an expectation of Deans for accountability, transparency, and integrity of outcomes. This culture shift has changed from expecting an environment of open access to higher education to expecting student success, including actions that empower students to succeed [5]. If Deans do not adapt and embrace these changes their universities will not thrive to their full potential.

The Need for Authenticity

Authentic leadership is grounded in core values, strong emotional intelligence, and reliance on integrated and innovative teams to work on necessary everyday issues. As a Dean, you have a responsibility to integrate the work of faculty and staff to improve student success and empower students to know where they are and what they can do to improve. An authentic leader, as a change agent, will find new ways to inspire people and institutions to new ways of using data, new ways of doing business, and new ways of serving their students and communities. According to Bear et al., authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads (2015). An authentic leader will work hard to establish long-term, meaningful relationships with their students, faculty, and community and have the self-discipline needed to get results.

Authenticity will lead to open communication among staff, faculty, and students. According to Floyd [6] “academics are much less likely to simply accept managerial decisions without demanding for a sound justification and may actively challenge or ignore them”. An authentic Dean must demonstrate their invaluable role as they use their words to create action. Within this action they will demonstrate their vision and strategic plan to their staff, students, and community. An authentic leader will be open and transparent to their community since improved accountability and analytics will bring forth important stories about where students are on their pathway to success. When leadership is open and communicates stories with their students, faculty, and staff, even when they are unfavorable, it is an imperative first step forwards transforming institutional models and cultures to bring about change [5].

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is crucial to the construction of organizational accountability that scholars should operationalize. The importance of transparency and accountability has increased after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. While transparency refers to corporate information being visible and accessible to staff, students, and external stakeholders [7], accountability ensures that an institution is setting the right targets, measuring them consistently, and using the information for improvement. Institutions are accountable to state priorities which are usually political, economic, and academic concerns [5]. Deans must weigh each decision they make and ensure that they are keeping the balance between the three.

One aspect of being a great leader as a Dean is being accountable because multiple demands put higher education in a difficult position, which results in conflict between autonomy and collegial governance and accountability to federal, regional, state, and local stakeholders. [5]. All of these competing interests can put the Dean in a very uneasy position within the institution between internal and external forces. If a Dean is working as a change agent, this situation can place him or her under a lot of stress as they try to figure out the best way to innovate and transform their staff and institution [5]. Deans must believe in themselves and trust their intuition to make the best decisions for their institution [3].

Adhere to Strategic Plan

A good leader will have short term and long-term goals [3]. To be an effective change agent as a Dean he or she must work diligently to develop the sort of leaders who are needed; individuals who can inspire and persuade [8]. According to Collins, “faculty members need, then recruit people who will be effective in that environment. They should commit to faculty wide training to foster innovation aimed at managing and stimulating change” ([8] p.561). Deans must constantly reinvent and stimulate the strategic dialogue with the changing times to ensure that they are advancing their university to the future while still staying within their strategic plan and adhering to the goals and values of the university in which they serve. Kachaner et al notes that although there is no one-size-fits-all approach to strategic planning, universities that get the most benefit from their strategic-planning activities have four things in common: they explore strategy at distinct time horizons, constantly reinvent and stimulate the strategic dialogue, engage the broad organization, and invest in execution and monitoring [9].

The Power to Inspire

The Dean cannot carry out his or her vision alone and must cooperative their efforts with the department’s chairman who by the nature of their work is specializes faculty with great experience that can benefit the mission of the Dean if it is used right. The chair of each department, often considered the first among equals, is presumed to represent and protect the faculty’s interests [8]. Chairpersons have many roles to play that can enhance the Dean’s success and it is imperative for the Dean to trust their staff who help with his or her work from organization to distribution and any technical or academic work their mission might need. Deans depend upon the Chairperson for support and leadership to change program priorities, curriculum and instruction, and faculty priorities. In many ways, they feel that the Chairperson acts for the Dean. The distribution of leadership between the staff is the best way to promote the vision of the Dean and make it workable.

“Due to the independent and professional nature of academic work it is widely accepted that leaders cannot be effective without the support of their departmental colleagues” ([6] p.20). The social skills to inspire administration, faculty, staff, and students to work towards a single vision requires a highly energized and motivated leader. The gift to inspire is critical, because when skepticism is allowed to cloud the vision, the risk of being less effective, or set off track is highly probable. Undoubtedly, it is much easier to work with those inspired and motivated by a shared vision guided by the change agent in his or her role as Dean.

Some Challenges Facing Deans in The 21st Century

Financial Challenges: Oftentimes Deans will need to navigate their college during a declared financial exigency such as limited resources as declared by the President or Provost. This is an opportunity for a Dean to look to the new programs that may attract new students to the respective colleges.

Faculty Discontent: As stated earlier in this paper, the Dean must rely on senior and junior faculty to buy into the division of the Dean and be able to work toward that vision.

Curriculum Challenges: Course offering, and budgets are constantly moving targets which can contribute to insecurity within the college. One of the most important challenges for Deans will be having to face is an accreditation visit and approval of its programs.

Provost Challenges: The relationship between the Dean and the Provost is a critical one. The Provost needs to have complete agreement with the vision of the Dean and must be supportive of his/her mission. Also, the vision of the Dean must be harmonious with the mission statement of the Provost and President. If not, the Dean’s tenure will be short.

Staff turnover and conflicts: Deans must be prepared to see constant change in the organization. There is a constant need for training, orientation, dismissal issues as well as promotion and tenure issues. Deans will need to be proactive in establishing practices and procedures with faculty and staff.

Personal challenges: Oftentimes Deans must make unpopular decisions for the betterment of the college. This may hinder personal friendships with staff and faculty. Only few can appreciate the constant challenges of a Dean. Personal goals must be put aside for the success of the college. Loneliness and isolation are sometimes a pressure all Deans face.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is our belief that there are several key components to being an effective leader as a change agent in the role of a Dean. To achieve success as a Dean of the School of Public Health, he or she must be an entrepreneur, cultivate town and gown relationships, have a definitive vision, embrace and enhance change, have authenticity, practice transparency and accountability, adhere to a strategic plan, and have the power to inspire others. Without those key components, the Dean will have a short tenure and pass fleetingly on the academic chessboard of the higher education institution.

Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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