

The Experience of a New Deanship for Two Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellows

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- Dean • Transitions • Leadership • Strategic planning • Personnel management
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

KEY POINTS

- Take time to assess and resist the temptation to change without understanding.
- Build your team; look to engage and reinvigorate faculty and staff.
- Negotiate, demonstrate, and communicate the vision for the future.
- When leading, be consistent and transparent.

So, you have been through the dean interviews, met with the faculty, communicated with administrators and other constituents, and presented your vision for the future. You are offered the job of the next dean of nursing. Fortified with a sense of having entered into a social contract with faculty and armed with a charter for action, what do you do? Well, for the first few weeks, at least, perhaps nothing, at least nothing transformational.

BACKGROUND

What does a dean do? The role in the early part of the twentieth century involved student issues; today's deans are responsible for the budget, personnel issues, fundraising, oversight of the curriculum in light of resources, and, more recently, entrepreneurship.¹

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For a dean new to an organization, some have argued that there are predictable phases to the role of dean.² These have been characterized as honeymoon, disenchantment, reality, maturity, and a golden phase.³ From the perspective of a new dean, the idea of a honeymoon period may be characterized by individual excitement and enthusiasm at being able to work with new people to fulfill individual, faculty, and institutional goals. Although these early weeks and months are a time of understanding the organization and fostering new relationships, the dean must also demonstrate political and business acumen; this is the time to negotiate the resources essential for a college to achieve its mission and goals. There are other perspectives on the honeymoon period. For one, the period provides an opportunity for assessing a new organization and its strengths and weaknesses and offers a new dean time for thoughtful reflection without necessarily being required to act and institute change immediately. But it can also be a period where there are opportunities for a new dean to be forgiven for not immediately understanding the inner workings and acting in ways that might seem to be out of character with the organizational culture. In either case, Watkins⁴ acknowledges that the first 3 months of a new appointment can be highly influential in the development of the relationship between leader, faculty, and staff. The honeymoon period may also be characterized as a time when the newly appointed dean's efforts are centered on short-term issues, building relationships, and leading an organization's activities.

ASSESSMENT STAGE

From a personal perspective, the first 90 days of a deanship also has phases, critical activities that are essential to negotiate successfully if the dean is to achieve the organizational mission and goals. The first of these might be considered the assessment stage. There is inevitably a great temptation to rush into action and bring about organizational change, given that your appointment was predicated on a vision that was seen as important and coherent with the organization. During these early days, it is important to assess the organization and, if necessary, be prepared to do nothing, but all the time listening and observing. Although it is tempting to quickly become the architect of a well-constructed organizational plan, this cannot be done effectively without understanding what you have inherited.⁵ The dean must understand how things work before attempting to change things. This is important because progress toward new goals requires leadership and change. For this to be effective, there has to be a separation from the past—the old ways that may no longer be effective in the current educational or business climate.⁶ At the same time, an organization's history is important to avoid a *déjà vu* climate, where there is reinventing of the same mistakes or inefficiencies of the past without a clear rationale and justification. Nevertheless, a new dean has to make an honest and balanced assessment quickly and find a balance between introspection and acting circumspectly and the importance of changing what is not working. This is crucial given that part of a new leader's role is to overcome institution and faculty inertia and create a momentum to achieve new goals and expectations. During this assessment phase, a dean is going to find issues and problems that need a solution. Without a thorough assessment, a dean must resist the temptation to answer questions too soon without fully understanding the complexity and nuances of what this means.

During this early assessment, it is highly likely that there are problems not disclosed when negotiating the initial appointment contract. Some may only be known by those in the college; others may be well known by the president and provost as well as the community at large. Spend the first 6 to 9 months taking care of critical issues that may involve public relations, curricular change, organizational culture, National Council

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