

Let Me Count the Ways¹

As you pull into your garage you can't even remember the commute home from the college office because your mind has been going over your growing list of frustrations with the new Dean. During the interviews last year you thought he was obviously the best candidate. Although an external candidate, he seemed to really have a good feel for your college. He has already been able to get the Provost to allocate new positions and a budget augmentation to the college. And he has some good ideas about changes that you agree the college really needs. It was natural that you accepted his offer to stay on as the college's associate dean. The new Dean obviously cares about the college and the students, just as you do. In fact, you really do want him to be successful.

Only in your fourth year as the college's one and only associate dean, you had enjoyed working with the former dean, and you felt like a real colleague and administrative partner with the interim dean, and so you were looking forward to working with this new dean. You see yourself becoming a dean someday. And you were looking forward to working with the new Dean in the hope of learning more about how to be a good dean.

But, now in the chill of mid-winter, it's clear to you that there are problems: You are a very organized person and you like to know what work you have to do and what the deadlines are. You work fast and you work well, so the Dean has nothing to complain about there. But you do! Because the Dean never seems to remember what work he's already dumped on you. He is constantly pulling you off one assignment to give you another, more urgent one. Every time he thinks of something it becomes the newest and most important thing for you and everyone else in the office to address.

Okay, you tell yourself, so he's not the only person like that. But what frustrates you even more is that in his apparent desire to be loved by all he makes exceptions to longstanding policies of the college and even of the university, although you have advised him that these policies exist. You know for a fact that in two months he made more budgetary promises than the college could ever hope to fulfill in five years. And he has explicitly told you that if he gives one department something you have to help him find a way to be sure that the other departments get something too. A couple of the more clever and perceptive Chairs have already picked up on this and they are the first ones to his door looking for their share when they see that some other department was given some resources of any kind. You've warned the Dean about these Chairs and you've tried to explain the college and university budget realities to him, but your new Dean doesn't seem to have much interest in what he blithely calls "the humdrum administrative details." He has said to you that you shouldn't worry about the budget because at the end of the day nobody is going to worry if the new dean's budget is in the red the first year or two as long as the great big university is in the black.

At first you thought this was irresponsible, but since the Provost seems to be supporting the Dean financially and in many other ways, you now are wondering whether the Dean might not be right about this. Maybe it does make sense to overspend if nobody is going to hold the college accountable. You think maybe you should file this clever little trick away for the day when you'll be a new dean someplace.

¹All characters, situations, and stories described here are fictional. No reference to actual persons, events, or institutions is intended or assumed. Drs. Peter Facione and Carol Giancarlo developed and refined this hypothetical case based on the experiences gained through their service as faculty, administrators, workshop presenters, and leadership consultants to colleges and universities throughout the nation.

During his interview the new Dean promised to be consultative and collaborative. That was great with you, until you learned that he consults by sharing his embarrassingly mistaken half-baked first drafts of memos to the Provost with every Chair, program director and member of the office staff from you to the administrative assistant. Half the staff now think they are associate deans too! His egalitarianism has raised everyone's expectations regarding how important their voices should be in college decision making. It might not be so bad if he would share a draft that was based on the revisions you offered. But you have quickly learned that there is no point in working too hard to help him improve the documents he drafts because he ignores your input or treats it as of no more value than the input of anyone else on the staff. You may be wrong to think this way, but it feels to you as if he simply does not value your work; or perhaps that he takes you for granted in his desire to buddy up to everyone else.

Okay, so maybe you can live with that; after all wide consultation is a good thing. And maybe the college needs this sort of organizational leveling, given that the previous deans had reputations for being autocratic and rigidly enforcing "chain of command" decision-making. You're just not sure if the expectations that the new Dean is engendering in everyone aren't going to backfire when they find out that the new Dean often has his mind already made up about something before he starts "consulting." You've seen that. In fact once he told you that appearances were more important than reality, and that a good dean makes people believe they were part of the decision, even when they are not. You've begun to wonder whether orchestrating the appearance of consultation might not be a useful management device.

What's starting to make you really uncomfortable are the odd looks and curious questions you have been getting lately from your close friends in the central administration and from the associate deans of the other schools. Their "How's it going with the New Guy?" along with their knowing smile or their sympathetic sad-face is starting to get to you. You're thinking that this new dean is developing a reputation and it is not one that you want your name associated with.

What triggered all this is that earlier today the Associate Provost, also a long time friend of yours, asked you to stop by the office to review some space allocation plans which affect in a minor way your college. You know how easy it would be to take that opportunity with the Associate Provost to really unload on your Dean.

Questions:

- 1. What's going on with the Associate Dean -- what's the Associate Dean's problem? What should this Associate Dean do?**
- 2. Suppose that in the meeting about space reallocation plans the Associate Provost starts fishing for information about the new Dean's performance. How much of this should the Associate Dean share?**
- 3. If you were the Provost and you learned that one of your newly hired deans was regarded in this way by one his associate deans, what would you do?**

A department Chair comes to you and said, "I really like the new Dean and all the perks he's doling out. But I've been here for thirty years and this isn't real. I'm worried he's promising the central administration more enrollment than we can deliver. You've got to moderate this guy. I can't say anything because my faculty expect me to get all I can for the department; and the other Chairs would think that I'm only kissing up. You're the only one who can talk sense to him."

- 4. What would you do? What would you say to the Chair? What would you not say?**