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Confessions of a Dean: Barriers and Breakthroughs to Communication

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CONFESSIONS OF A DEAN: BARRIERS AND BREAKTHROUGHS TO COMMUNICATION

*Melissa A. Essary**

I. INTRODUCTION—COMMUNICATION

INTELLECTUALLY, deans acknowledge the critical role that communication plays in the success of our schools. As leaders within our institutions, we are responsible for ensuring fluid communication among faculty, staff, students, alumni, and other external stakeholders. For example, a dean must develop and effectively articulate the vision for her school's future, which cannot be held only by the dean. Deans must work to create a shared vision, and to do so, we must be effective communicators on multiple levels. It is indisputable that communication is the "lifeblood" of our institutions.¹ A well-managed communications network should certainly bring nourishment not only to the school's core—faculty and staff—but also to its outer extremities to form an enterprise that has a growing base of knowledge and clear purpose.²

Even though most deans agree that effective communication is critically important within our organizations, many deans are not effective communicators or they do not encourage open communications within their school. More than one law school deanship has ended prematurely because of the dean's failure to effectively communicate.³ The passionate obsession of an organizational leader must be to clearly communicate downward, upward, and horizontally. The best rule of thumb is to "never assume that anyone knows anything."⁴ "Leadership is influence"; that is, influencing others to act in ways that they might not have otherwise, except through your guidance.⁵ To effectively influence and lead, you must be a strong communicator and willing to work closely with all of your school's constituents.⁶

I have been a law school dean for just two years. I have made my share of mistakes, but I have also realized some successes in the area of communications. Consistent and substantive communication among faculty, staff, students, and

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1. HANS FINZEL, *THE TOP TEN MISTAKES LEADERS MAKE* 131 (2007).

2. *Id.* at 130-31.

3. Kenneth C. Randall, *Longevity*, 37 U. TOL. L. REV. 127, 129 (2005) (discussing the third challenge to deans' longevity—effective communication).

4. FINZEL, *supra* note 1, at 130.

5. *Id.* at 19.

6. *See id.* at 58.

alumni provide these individuals with a sense of ownership of our school, thus encouraging them to be active participants in all aspects of our program.

The purpose of this article is to challenge law school deans to think deliberately and strategically about how to communicate with their internal and external constituents, while ensuring messages are clear, consistent, inspirational, and achievable. Deans must work intentionally to create an organizational culture that respects and encourages transparent communications; the ideas that I offer can be easily implemented if one is willing to be disciplined in managing time and putting people before projects.

Part II of this article outlines some major barriers to effective communications and means by which to overcome these challenges. Part III highlights some practical tools that will help you facilitate open and dynamic communications within the school. I have worked to implement these techniques among Campbell Law School's various constituencies, and I believe the exchange of information and cultural health of our law school has been measurably increased through these methods.

II. BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

A. *Ourselves*

When we look in the mirror, we are probably staring at the most significant barrier to effective communication. My observation is that many deans assume they are great communicators who articulate their thoughts with passion and precision. Indeed, most deans probably have done so in the past. Yet we must be honest in analyzing the personality types of many deans. Law school deans have often achieved their position because they are task-oriented, type-A individuals with many accomplishments.⁷ This is true whether the dean came from within the academy or from private or governmental practice. Thus, deans bring achievement-oriented mentalities directly into their positions of leadership within their schools.

Law school deans tend to be driven individuals who often live in the future. We are looking toward that next great task that must be accomplished. The future draws us like a magnet, and the tasks that we neglect because of that forward-thinking approach can create critical problems in our deanship. In our fanaticism about the future—that next milestone we must reach—we may fail miserably to communicate effectively with the people who can help make our dreams a reality. We may see communications, particularly face-to-face communications, as an interruption to the tasks we are trying to accomplish.⁸

In his book *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*, author Hans Finzel states, "Experts confirm that the most effective leaders spend most of their time being with people and solving people problems."⁹ Leadership, Finzel argues, is

7. *See id.* at 48-49 (stating that "most successful leaders today tend toward being task oriented").

8. *See id.* at 45-59 (discussing the interruptions that arise from communication).

9. *Id.* at 49.

“essentially a people business.”¹⁰ To put it bluntly, ““Good thoughts in your head not delivered, mean squat!””¹¹ Only through close and consistent association with people can true organizational transformation and growth occur.¹² Successful leaders must master people skills, including effective means of communication. Deans must monitor and even put aside their drive to accomplish tasks and view people not as interruptions, but as real work.

Here is a simple test to discover if you are task oriented or people oriented: When someone walks into your office and interrupts your task to converse, how do you react?¹³ Do you relax and converse until the chat has natural closure, or do you press to end the conversation as quickly as possible to get back to the task at hand? If deans fail in the human element, will we truly be able to lead? Remember, as dean of your law school, your faculty, staff, and students are looking to you as a leader. You cannot be an effective leader without being in the people business.

B. Information Overload

Managing information consumes much of our days.¹⁴ Most of the information in today’s world comes in e-mails instead of phone calls, U.S. mail, or faxes. Personally, I have been surprised—no, overwhelmed—at the volume of substantive e-mail that I receive and send each day. The e-mail traffic is absolutely relentless and far more than I can possibly handle if I am also spending quality time with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and others. Our almost paperless environment saturates us with instant messages that we feel compelled to answer as quickly as they are received. Just as fast as we receive e-mails, we are also disseminating massive amounts of information back to others. No one can quarrel that e-mail can be a highly effective communications tool, yet its overuse has become a barrier to other channels of communication that are far more personal, rich, and expressive.

Do you check e-mail hourly or continually? Many of us feel connected at the hip to our computers or handheld e-mail devices, reluctant to part with them for even a day’s vacation. We must add incessant e-mail traffic on top of other demands for our time. We let our e-mail follow us home at night and on the weekends, where we continue to check it after hours or during other activities, often to the vocal chagrin of our families or significant others. No wonder deans are tired.¹⁵

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.* (quoting Ken Blanchard).

12. *See id.* at 52-53 (discussing the relationship between direct contact with persons and achieving direct results).

13. *Id.* at 57.

14. MIKE SONG, VICKI HALSEY & TIM BURRESS, *THE HAMSTER REVOLUTION: STOP INFO-GLUT—RECLAIM YOUR LIFE!* 8 (2008).

15. Addiction to e-mail is certainly not a phenomenon that is limited to law school deans. *Id.* at 12. Our entire society is obsessed with electronic communications. We have all seen individuals driving down the highway checking their messages and worse, e-mailing back (with one hand on the steering wheel and one on the Blackberry).

Here is a startling bit of arithmetic: Assume you receive and send one hundred e-mail messages each workday, fifty weeks per year. That equates to 25,000 e-mail messages annually and when measured in time, roughly one hundred workdays per year. If you could reduce the amount of e-mail you send and receive by twenty percent, you would free up twenty workdays a year for other activities, including much-needed time off with your family or the pursuit of a long-suppressed hobby.¹⁶

According to Heinsz, the average decanal tenure is somewhere in the four-to five-year range.¹⁷ By the time many deans are hitting their stride, they opt to return to a faculty position or private practice because they are burned out. A life with less focus on e-mail and a greater balance with family and other external pursuits could potentially ward off dean fatigue and burnout.

A recent book, *The Hamster Revolution*, states that workers are asked to process more information, particularly e-mail, than is humanly possible.¹⁸ According to the authors, we multitask our way through an “avalanche of disorganized, unstructured information.”¹⁹ The authors recommend three useful principles that may help you to reduce the amount of time you spend on e-mail:

“*Send Less—Get Less.*”²⁰ “For every five e-mails we send, people send back three,” which is called the boomerang effect.²¹ Before sending, ask yourself: “Is my e-mail needed, appropriate, and targeted?” If the answer is “No,” to any of the three questions, do not send it, and you will reduce the boomerang effect.²²

“*Improve E-mail Quality.*”²³ Use strong descriptive words in the subject line, and then sculpt the body of your e-mail. Be concise and avoid the “wall of words” format.²⁴ Use bullets, which helps reduce eye fatigue.²⁵ Help others improve the value of their e-mail. If the information you need to communicate is more than two or three paragraphs, consider another communication method, such as picking up the phone or walking down the hall to speak face-to-face with a colleague.²⁶

“*Categorize and File Your E-mails.*”²⁷ Select a single method that reduces overlap, decreases uncertainty, and defeats info-glut. Make sure folders and sub-folders are such that you can quickly retrieve information. Gone are the rows of file folders in cabinets and drawers and in their place is an e-mail archival system. Engage staff from your institution’s IT team if you need assistance in

16. *Id.*

17. Timothy J. Heinsz, *Deaning Today: A Worthwhile Endeavor—If You Have the Time*, 31 U. Tol. L. Rev. 615, 615 (2000).

18. SONG, HALSEY & BURRESS, *supra* note 14, at xi.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 17.

21. *Id.*

22. *See id.*

23. *Id.* at 41-52.

24. *Id.* at 48.

25. *Id.*

26. *See id.* at 49.

27. *Id.* at 73-80.

creating a proper e-mail filing system. Create a method that enables you to quickly file and find information.²⁸

The authors of *The Hamster Revolution* also “recommend disconnecting [the] ‘ding’” or other sound that your computer makes when new e-mail arrives.²⁹ Additionally, you may want to consider processing e-mails in batches by scheduling thirty-minute periods each day to review and respond to messages. The authors recommend aggressively deleting messages with no future value and keeping no more than thirty or forty e-mails in your inbox.³⁰

III. TOOLS TO FACILITATE COMMUNICATION

A. *Channels of Communication*

Each day we choose different channels through which we communicate: in-person, phone calls, written media such as reports and letters, and, of course, e-mail. Evidence indicates that channels differ widely in their capacity to convey information.³¹ A given channel’s richness and effectiveness is determined by its ability to handle multiple cues simultaneously, facilitate rapid feedback, and be personal.³² Face-to-face discussions score highest in channel richness, as this method offers multiple information cues, including spoken words, intonations, and non-verbal cues such as physical posture, facial expressions, and gestures.³³ Remember, it’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it.

Less-rich channels convey less information. For example, a phone conversation is less rich because one cannot see non-verbal cues, expressions, gestures, and the like.³⁴ The channels lowest in richness are written media, including hard-copy documents and e-mail, which are the very channels that we typically use the most.³⁵ In choosing the most effective communications channel, always evaluate the audience, message, and desired results. Is the message routine and straightforward with little or no response required? Or is the message more complicated, requiring thoughtful input or discussion? If the message is the former, a channel low in richness may be fully appropriate, but a non-routine message needs a channel that is richer in its capacity to convey information, whether that channel is a group meeting or a one-on-one conversation.³⁶

28. *See id.* at 76-77.

29. *Id.* at 107.

30. *Id.* at 109.

31. STEPHEN P. ROBBINS, *THE TRUTH ABOUT MANAGING PEOPLE* 114-15 (2d ed. 2008).

32. *Id.* at 115.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* I will leave to another dean and another day the topic of meetings. While clearly a rich channel of communication, they often are a source of tension and stress and often are not as productive as they should be. My faculty has just completed its Self-Study in anticipation of an ABA site reaccreditation visit and is suffering from meeting fatigue.

B. *Deaning by Walking Around*

A dean's day is packed with unending tasks to accomplish, yet ponder what you might wish to do with an extra thirty minutes in the workday. If you can reduce your e-mail traffic and take other steps to control your calendar, you should strongly consider entering the richest channel of communication on a regular basis: the one-on-one conversation.

Is your office central to faculty offices or is it an isolated sanctuary? What about its proximity to staff offices? Leadership (or deaning) by walking around can initially be difficult, as there may not be a specific message to convey. Wandering the halls might also seem like a waste of time, and it may unnerve some faculty and staff.

As you build a reputation as a "coffee-cup dean," stopping by offices to check on faculty and staff, you may discover that this exercise is a highly effective use of your time each day.³⁷ By taking time from your day to spend with others, you will show that you care and that you are not an isolationist, and through impromptu conversations, you will gain a sense of the day-to-day happenings throughout your law school. You may gather information that can be highly useful that might not otherwise reach your office. Deaning by walking around may also be an effective means by which to create consensus for an idea before a formal meeting on the issue.³⁸ Plus, listening to the ideas of others can help you refine your own thoughts and allow other individuals to develop ownership of the issue based on their input.

You can also use this time to share important or exciting news in person. Campbell Law School recently received a major capital campaign gift, and my development director and I walked around to various offices to share the great news individually with faculty and staff. People were excited, and though our conversations were not protracted, each individual felt personally connected to the law school's development efforts.

A cautionary note: when visiting the offices of your faculty and staff, be sure to maintain a democratic process by spending time with everyone, not just a select few. While it may be tempting to limit your regular stops, as some faculty and staff are generally more encouraging and likeable than others, doing so can create the impression of a clique or power-group.³⁹ This can lead to a rattling of the sabers on even unimportant issues, as no one likes feeling left out. Every member of your law school faculty and staff, even a negative one, is a member of the team and must be treated as such.

Most deans have many external responsibilities and are frequently away from the office or campus. The morning I return from a trip, whether it was for

37. *Id.* Research shows that high-performing managers tend to be more media sensitive than low-performing managers. *Id.*

38. *See id.* (stating that face-to-face talking has a high degree of richness and results in a maximum amount of information transmittal).

39. *See id.* at 90-91 (explaining that if you treat people with respect, they will perform to your expectations).

development purposes, a conference, or other reasons, I strive to be a “coffee-cup dean,” to be visible and to show others that I care about their endeavors.

Another benefit of deaning-by-walking-around is the opportunity it provides to affirm the efforts and intrinsic value of others.⁴⁰ “Effective leaders realize that most people are motivated more by affirmation and encouragement rather than by financial reward.”⁴¹ Providing in-person affirmation gives people emotional fuel to do their work and do it well. Such affirmation can be given privately or offered publicly at faculty or staff meetings, or through e-mails circulated to your law school team. Affirming good work performed for the common good of your program helps build individual and collective morale, ultimately benefiting your institution and your ability to lead.⁴²

Members of your faculty, staff, or students may request one-on-one meetings with you. These meetings can be stressful, but they provide an opportunity for leadership. If someone calls to schedule an appointment, have your staff inquire about the purpose of the meeting.⁴³ This notation “can help you prepare for the conversation and make the meeting time more productive.”⁴⁴

If a conversation is spur of the moment and initiated by another, you may not be prepared for all of the issues raised. The best approach may be to listen, ask questions to thoroughly understand the situation, and respond that you will get back to the person as quickly as possible.⁴⁵ While the other person may have an agenda or a specific outcome that he is trying to achieve, do not make a decision without considering the larger picture. Think before you speak. Be sincere and committed to the person, gather the necessary information, and then appropriately respond.⁴⁶

Each year, I ask faculty members to prepare a Faculty Activity Report.⁴⁷ After I have had the opportunity to study the report along with student evaluations, I meet one-on-one with each faculty member to discuss their performances over the past year and their goals for the coming year. For my high-performing faculty, this meeting is another opportunity to affirm and motivate them. For those whose performances lag, it is an opportunity for candor, goal revisions, and encouragement. The latter meetings are not easy, but they are necessary to advance the law school’s purpose and service to our students. Campbell Law School is small enough to allow me to meet and set goals with each faculty member. While this scenario is not possible in all law

40. See *id.* (stating that giving valuable feedback results in high employee turnout).

41. FINZEL, *supra* note 1, at 70.

42. Handwritten notes are another means by which to affirm those who excel. *Id.* at 62, 66.

43. JEFFREY L. BULLER, *THE ESSENTIAL ACADEMIC DEAN: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO COLLEGE LEADERSHIP* 253 (2007).

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.* at 253-54.

47. My thanks to Dean David Van Zandt of Northwestern University School of Law, who graciously offered his Faculty Activity Report to other deans at the 2007 ABA Mid-Year Deans’ Meeting in Miami. I took him up on his offer and quickly received it from his assistant via e-mail. I then tailored his report to fit the needs of my institution. Because the report asks for very detailed information, there are few surprises in my follow-up meetings with faculty.

schools, some type of feedback mechanism and evaluation must be implemented in all settings.

C. *Staying Connected with Students*

Maintaining ongoing communications with students is every bit as important to the health and vitality of your law school as is facilitating strong communications among faculty and staff. Throughout the academic year, students are aware that in my role as dean, I maintain an open-door policy. The vast majority of students will never stop by my office, but as circumstances warrant, many do. It is imperative that students feel that their dean is approachable and cares about their personal well-being.

In my time at Campbell Law, I have held open, free-flowing “Conversations with the Dean” once a semester. Scores of students have come to discuss issues of substance, brainstorm ideas, and even vent a little. Ultimately, our law schools are about the students—they are our customers—and they greatly appreciate the opportunity to share their joys, thoughts, and frustrations in an open, dynamic venue.

The Campbell Law students were recently administered the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (“LSSSE”),⁴⁸ and I facilitated several discussion forums after receiving information about concerns that were presented via the LSSSE. The “Conversations with the Dean” format allowed me to have candid conversations with the students that ultimately helped to move the law school forward.

D. *Handwritten Notes*

In today’s pell-mell world, handwritten notes almost seem a thing of the past. Being relatively rare these days, handwritten notes can be highly effective and emotionally meaningful.⁴⁹ During my tenure as a professor at Baylor Law School, Dean Brad Toben would occasionally send me handwritten notes to both congratulate and motivate me. I specifically remember an accolade that he once offered, calling me a “can-do” person. It was a simple compliment that affirmed my efforts as a professor and lifted my spirits to give my best to Baylor Law.

Taking cues from Dean Toben, I try to write notes of appreciation to my faculty and staff. Writing notes can be a labor-intensive process, particularly when deans are already pressed for time, but I see the impact of this gesture throughout Campbell Law School. During a recent visit with a staff member, I noticed a note that I had written to her many months ago posted on her bulletin

48. The LSSSE is a survey that “asks students about their law school experience—how they spend their time, what they feel they’ve gained from their classes, their assessment of the quality of interactions with faculty and friends, and about important activities.” About LSSSE, http://lssse.iub.edu/html/about_lssse.cfm (last visited Jan. 16, 2009).

49. SAM DEEP & LYLE SUSSMAN, SMART MOVES FOR PEOPLE IN CHARGE: 130 CHECKLISTS TO HELP YOU BE A BETTER LEADER 69-70 (1995); FINZEL, *supra* note 1, at 62, 66.

board. This little note was important enough to her that it earned a near-permanent place in her office.

Handwritten notes also are effective in other contexts. I routinely write such notes to those with whom I have had development appointments, those who have made significant financial contributions, and other individuals whom I want to thank. I have noticed that many individuals who have received handwritten notes from me often thank me when I next see them. In an era when even computer-generated U.S. mail is scarce, the handwritten note can make a highly favorable impression.⁵⁰

E. Monthly Internal Reports

Each month, I prepare a faculty and staff activity report for the president and provost of Campbell University. This is an outstanding ongoing opportunity to collect information from the entirety of the law school and to disseminate this information not only to the senior university administration, but also to the entire law school faculty and staff.

A few days before the end of the month, I ask each faculty member and the director of each unit within the law school to submit his or her monthly report. I seek short, pithy updates about top-level accomplishments, news, and activities that have occurred during the previous thirty days. The information needs to be timely and relevant, allowing effective updates to be compiled into a report of less than five pages.

During my first few months as Campbell's dean, I would often receive lengthy and sometimes irrelevant reports from some individuals, but through time and example, the faculty and staff have adjusted well to submitting concise and relevant reports. My assistant and I are able to quickly prepare a consistently useful and readable report for the Campbell University president and provost, which we also share with the law school faculty and staff. During the 2008-09 academic year, I plan to enhance the monthly report by including a cover sheet that highlights a small number of noteworthy issues and accomplishments.

F. The Campbell Law Brief—Communicating to the Outside

Like many small law schools, Campbell Law does not have a communications director, much less a marketing department. For years, the existing staff had endeavored to produce an annual glossy alumni magazine. Production of the magazine was sporadic and time-consuming. The magazine was always attractive, but the contents were often dated and it only touched our alumni, at most, once a year.

In the summer of 2007, we put the annual magazine on the backburner to focus on a new bimonthly *Campbell Law Brief* newsletter. This was an effort to establish consistent and predictable communications with the law school's alumni and friends. The newsletter is a four-color, double-sided information piece designed with bold graphics and filled with short, tight, relevant stories.

50. DEEP & SUSSMAN, *supra* note 49, at 69-70; FINZEL, *supra* note 1, at 62, 66.

Every other month, the newsletter is mailed to alumni and other friends of the law school with easy-to-read, up-to-the-minute information. Feedback from the alumni base has been uniformly positive. Everyone seems to have the three-to-five minutes necessary to read the piece, while some comment that the former magazine rarely held their attention. We soon hope to supplement this hard-copy piece with regular e-mail updates to alumni and friends.

As a new dean who receives information from other law schools, I can attest that brevity is what catches, and keeps, my attention. I rarely read another law school's alumni magazine cover to cover, yet if I receive a tightly written postcard or something similar, I am more likely to peruse it. Also, if the graphic design of the piece is attractive, I frequently save it for ideas for future Campbell publications. We all recycle good ideas.

IV. CONCLUSION

As deans, time is both the scarcest commodity and our most valuable asset. We strive for balance, yet we often feel crushed by the inability to manage information and accomplish tasks. In this article, I have outlined some barriers that prevent us from communicating effectively to our various constituencies and presented means by which to free up time. This newly freed time should help you communicate more effectively and influence others, particularly if you use some of the communication tools with both internal and external constituents.

A successful dean has to be willing to listen. No one has all the answers, so be open to listening to different points of view. I continue to learn every day. Receiving regular feedback from faculty, staff, students, and alumni will likely be the key in shaping the mission of your school.

Successful deans must also develop and deliver a compelling story about their schools, one that builds on its history but is forward reaching and thinking. The story should inspire multiple constituencies, fitting your institution's culture and goals. Practice delivering the message in a dynamic way, molding it to fit different audiences with whom you will interact. Campbell Law School will relocate to downtown Raleigh, North Carolina in 2009, so my compelling story centers around a school that prepares great lawyers and soon will establish itself in one of the nation's most dynamic capital cities. Campbell students will be within walking distance of the state capitol, state legislature, all levels of courts, law firms, nonprofits, and the like. The students will have unparalleled clinical opportunities, a new academic partnership with North Carolina State University, and other innovative programs and relationships. These upcoming developments form the basis of my current message. Your institution's story likely is just as compelling or more so.

When you feel mired in the avalanche of e-mail and planning for your future accomplishments, remember it is today's relationships that will be the key to advancing the priorities and vision of your law school. Learn to walk around your law school and spend time with faculty, staff, and students. Learn to let the e-mail go and, most importantly, learn to enjoy what you do by leading and being an encouragement to others.