Book Review:
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The first volume on Leadership in Theological Education series focuses on the role of the Academic Dean in the life of the seminary including sections on the foundations of theological leadership, the responsibilities and characteristics of academic leadership, and the general leadership practices of the Dean, with worksheets and Reflective Questions for Action Points for each chapter. The following summarizes the four sections of the book, with a focused review on the last three.

Summary

The first section sets the *raison de’etre* of theological education. The cluster of four chapters delineates not only the biblical foundations but also the process of developing the school’s mission and vision. The section also defines excellence in theological education, proposing eleven contributing factors.

The discussion on Academic Leadership in the second section includes eight chapters that describe the essentials of Academic Leadership. With a focus on the character and responsibilities of the dean, the fifth chapter emphasizes the importance of the nurturing of a healthy relationship with the President, with suggestions on how they can work in synergy and with purpose. In the sixth chapter, the themes of responsibility and character also play essential roles in developing a view of the Dean position as both a vocation and a ministry. Through Deanship, the academic leader engages opportunities to grow and the challenges
of administrative oversight that are at the heat of the job.

The third section draws attention to the “administrative practices” that include strategic planning (Ch7); accreditation (Ch8); and institutional assessment (Ch9). Each has a critical role in the life of the institution and falls under the leadership of the Dean.

The final section highlights the “leadership practices” that are “inherent to effective leadership” (11). One of these practices is the role of a Dean as a change agent for the learning organization. The tenth chapter connects three threads of discussion: the nature of organizational change, the factors of internal and external environments and culture that encourage change, and the qualities of a leader who can bring change. Chapter 11 follows with a case study about managing and resolving conflict including a biblical perspective and methodology for conflict resolution. The final chapter conveys the author’s personal story as an Academic Leader with “practical reflections” on his view of effective academic leadership and the qualities and competencies required for the office of the Dean.

Critical Assessment

The book presents “the essential aspects that academic leaders need to be aware of” (10) in the context of theological and seminary education, noting that is “not intended to be a comprehensive text on academic leadership” (9). The following comments on the overall presentation of the book and the proposed “essentials.”

First, the editors and ICETE should be commended for providing a ready resource on Academic Leadership. Faculty members who find themselves in the role of Academic Dean often look for guidance and voices of experience as they begin to navigate the responsibilities. A cursory reading of the book gives a strong impression of the pivotal role of the Dean in the pursuit of excellence in theological education. It also describes the many tasks and complexity of the position.

1. The overall presentation of the topic of Academic Leadership has strengths and some gaps.

A significant strength of the book is the trustworthiness of the authors as global educational consultants. From their experience, they have carefully selected important topics within the discussion of Academic Leadership. Another strength of the book is the intentional engagement of the reader through the Action and Reflection questions given at the end of each chapter that provide an opportunity for Academic leaders to critically reflect on the essentials of the role in their specific contexts. This intentional engagement with the reader demonstrates the educational purpose of the book, inviting readers to learn and grow through
reflection and practice as they read.

Additionally, the story of the Dean in the last chapter very refreshing, engaging the reader through a vivid picture of the complex realities of the position. Placing the role of a Dean in an actual story adds clarity to abstract propositions.

The authors have presented some critical “essentials” of Academic Leadership drawn from years of research and cumulative experiences in leadership. However, there are also some observed gaps.

Although many of the authors served in missionary contexts, a diversity of voices seems underrepresented. The eleven contributors include one Asian, one African, and one Latin American, who is also the only woman in the group. The authors bring a wealth of global experiences to the conversation, but additional relevant-to-context perspectives are. Voices from other leaders in multi-cultural contexts could broaden a view of the essentials of Academic leadership.

While I agree that the administrative or oversight role is “central” to the work of the Dean (140), the division of Academic Leadership into three similar and overlapping categories gives the impression that each category requires distinct competencies. The continuity of the book might have been enhanced by using the story of the Dean as an integrative thread linking two apparent main sections of the book - Biblical/Theological Foundations and The Role of an Academic Leader.

2. **In addition to the relevant topics addressed by the book, some of the “essentials” could have received more in-depth treatment, and some additional issues could be included in this conversation.**

The authors present some “essentials” of Academic Leadership with definitions and insights drawn from years of research and cumulative experiences in leadership. However, some of the critical topics warrant more in-depth treatment, especially chapter 11 on Conflict Management and Chapter 10 on the Dean as Change Agent. Having a worksheet of Reflective Questions and Action Points at the end of every chapter feels redundant and at times unnecessary. Also, more current examples could provide stronger support than alluding to stories that happened decades ago. The inclusion of additional appropriate and contextual reader-engagement methods such as case studies would be helpful as they often “birth” more questions and in-process thoughts or ideas, which help bring relevance and tangibility to the task.

The fifth chapter argues for a strong relationship between the Dean and the President. In many seminary contexts, however, the Dean is not the only senior administrator working with the President. Rather, executive leadership often functions through a broader team to fulfill the mission of the institution.
Therefore, the Dean must nurture additional relationships beyond the President. For example, as Dean, I also represent the Faculty to the Board of Trustees, which requires that I strategically work to cultivate my relationship with the Board. The relational aspect of the role, partly discussed in Ch 6, could receive greater attention since the effective ministry of the Dean hinges on nurtured relationships that include shared governance with the leadership team and the Board of Trustees, collaborative decision-making with the faculty, and delegation of specific tasks to the academic support staff.

Another topic that might warrant greater attention is finding the right people to lead departments. In small seminaries, the Dean usually supervises several departments and programs. A key aspect of the job, therefore, is to find people who are learners, who are team players, and who are competent for the job. The work of the Dean is often to motivate and empower people to do the nitty-gritty work required. Finding ways to develop productive teams of people who collaboratively fulfill the mission of the institution is critical to the Dean’s survival.

The role of the Dean as a change agent often benefits from drawing on an outside objective perspective. The self-guided worksheets that look at “how things are” and “steps for moving forward” may not be a “game-changer.” However, soliciting competent academic consultants from outside the “bubble” of the seminary can bring value. Because many Deans come from internal faculty ranks, their familiarity with academic systems and culture may blind them to the gaps and “choke points” in the structure and processes of the institution, thereby making it difficult to initiate change. Outside consultants offer additional lenses that may assist the Dean in seeing the barriers to change. They may also help facilitate the strategic decision-making process.

The value of coaching and mentorship, especially for a new Dean, has critical importance. As already mentioned in chapters six and twelve, the role of the Dean is complex. It can be scary and overwhelming for those new to the task. The book provides vignettes of what the position looks like, but actually doing the job is another story. Trusted mentors and coaches walk alongside especially during the transition period through the early years. Since my appointment as Dean, I have survived and now thrived, because of the input of coaches and mentors who have helped me develop confidence along this journey.

Lastly, an effective Dean fosters a climate in which people flourish (Cannell 2011). Focusing too much on developing the right systems and right structures may obscure the organic nature of the learning organization. The Dean must also help build a community in which the faculty and the institution can grow and develop.

The book clearly delineates a set of essentials for the task of serving as a
successful Academic Dean However, the role of the Dean continues to evolve in the midst of the global and contextual realities of theological education. The book helps address the need for the Dean to be cognizant of the broader factors that can impinge on the task. As the seminary context changes, the essentials of Academic Leadership must continue to grow and develop as well.

Helpful Sources


https://www.academicleadertoday.com/leadership
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