

It's Not Easy

According to one who has “been there,” the key to extending the career life cycle of a business school

enjoyed the good fortune of being the dean of business for 18 years at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. After a while, however, I realized that I was the exception, not the rule. Most deans are gone long before 18 years—often in less than five. Why?

A quick study of my own deanly peers confirms that the shelf-life of a business school dean is not very long. In fact, conventional wisdom holds that business school deanships usually last about four or five years, an estimate supported by occasional surveys and my own observations. In 1981, for example, I attended AACSB's New Deans Seminar in Austin, Texas, where 59 participants were enrolled. In the years since that seminar, I have often checked the AACSB Membership Directory to tally the number of my classmates who are still at the helm. Five years after attending our Texas boot camp, only 25 individuals, or a little more than 40 percent of our class, were still in office. By 1991, only eleven deans—fewer than one in five—were around long enough to pick up their ten-year pins. A decade later, in 2001, only two of the original group of rookies

were still “The Dean.” Two years before, even I had passed on the baton of the deanship to my successor to seize the opportunity to become an endowed chair holder at ETSU.

I recently checked the online AACSB Membership Directory and found that only two of my 1981 New Deans Seminar classmates—Dave Billings of The University of Alabama, Huntsville, and Bud Barnes of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington—continue to rack up more years of service as business deans. In my most recent conversations with them, I learned that these two veterans are still enjoying the challenges and benefits of being dean.

How can Dave and Bud and others have such long and successful careers as deans while others are gone before they can even begin to enjoy the fruits of their deanships? Is there a natural course that is followed by deans, a life cycle that may be long or short depending on their personal, institutional, and environmental circumstances? And if so, what are their secrets of success and longevity?

To extend their years in the position, novice and

by **Allan D. Spritzer**

illustrations by Linda Helton



Being Dean

dean is to follow some crucial advice: Stay focused, set new challenges, and be prepared to exit gracefully.

veteran deans alike must understand, assess and anticipate the typical career life cycle of a business school dean. Their central challenge is to maintain the thrill and sense of accomplishment the job brings while effectively managing and avoiding its pitfalls.

Understanding the Cycle

From my experiences and observations before, during, and after my years as a dean, I've concluded the "career life cycle" of a business school dean progresses in five distinct stages. These stages begin with a *visionary* phase and progress to *implementation* and *maintenance* phases. They all too often, but not necessarily, end with *neurotic* and *suicidal* phases. When the five phases run full cycle, they follow a distinctive curve, shown in the figure above.

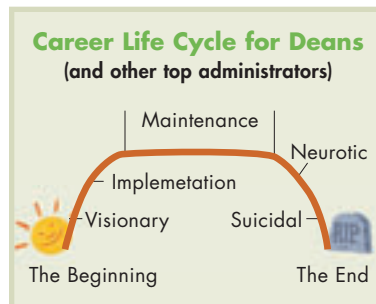
I've seen this cycle play out not only with deans, but also with many business executives and top university administrators. The duration of each phase, and of any individual cycle, can vary a great deal. But unless deans recognize the

warning signs of a "deanship in trouble" and plan accordingly, they may find themselves thrust from the early to late stages of the cycle sooner than they expect.

The Visionary Phase—Soon after his or her successful quest for the position, the new dean offers a new vision. Ambitious plans and strategies are initiated to trigger dramatic improvements. Support flows to the dean from virtually all stakeholders. The central administration, faculty, alumni, business community, and the media are eager to assist in the school's surge toward greatness. The good times are starting to roll.

The Implementation Phase—Resources are made available to the dean to bring plans to fruition. Accomplishments such as achieving accreditation or receiving mega-dollar endowments are celebrated in this period, which is often punctuated by moments of euphoria as progress toward the vision is made. The fun has really begun.

The Maintenance Phase—This stage can be the longest or the shortest of the cycle, and it can present the biggest challenges to a dean. Some key milestones are





achieved; some aren't. Resources become stretched, and the initial enthusiasm and euphoria begin to give way to frustrations and stresses. The dean must make tough choices and solve many problems while dealing with a variety of internal and external issues. These may include changes in the institution, its top leadership, or the overall environment. Pesky personnel problems that were once considered novel have now become chronic. The dean must be prepared for the ups and downs of the institutional roller coaster. To maintain the happiness of this phase, the dean must turn to new initiatives and creative coping strategies. Often, however, he or she may consider leaving the deanship for a new position in an attempt to initiate a new cycle to once again experience its visionary and implementation highs. The current situation is becoming exceedingly difficult.

The Neurotic Phase—If coping and exit strategies are not successfully implemented, dean “burnout” becomes imminent. The dean begins to exhibit mild to moderate neurotic symptoms. The once-acclaimed visionary champion may perceive disloyalty among the ranks and may view former allies as opponents. The dean now sees himself or herself as a target or a victim. Help is needed.

The Suicidal Phase—In this final stage of the career life cycle, the dean begins to exhibit behaviors that consciously or subconsciously motivate the powers-that-be to end the dean's tenure. Such behaviors include noncompliance with objectives or directives from above; failure to carry out essential responsibilities; support of untenable positions and decisions; de facto abdication of responsibilities in favor of other interests; public displays of undesirable conduct; or personal indiscretions that become known to university leadership. The singular focus becomes simple and too often self-fulfilling: Escape!

I have shared this life cycle with many current and former deans. None has disagreed with its patterns, and most have identified with the stages in their own careers or in the careers of others they know. Many have tried to assess for themselves

where they are in the cycle. A veteran dean recently informed me, “Al, I think I may be entering the suicidal phase!” When that thought crosses a dean's mind, it's definitely time to seek out examples of the most effective life cycle behaviors and apply them—quickly.

Secrets of Success

Many deans who have stayed in their positions for five, ten, and even 20 years or more know that it takes more than vision to maintain the proper perspectives. What may surprise many deans—especially those who see their visionary periods as long behind them—is that professional vision and inner peace are not mutually exclusive. Interviews with veteran deans reveal many valuable tips and strategies for continuing to move successfully, if not blissfully, among the first three phases of the career life cycle, while adeptly avoiding the unpleasantness of the final two.

Keep the ego in check. Deans, young and old, quickly need to lose all hubris and, instead, cultivate humility. “When I was a younger dean, I was much more aggressive and had an inflated opinion of myself,” admits Dave Long, who has been dean for 21 years between his stints at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania and at Ithaca College in New York. “I don't have that anymore. I've become either more humble or more mature. I leave my ego at the door.”

Be adaptive, not reactive. To use a common cliché, an adequate predictor for deaning success is a person's ability to “go with the flow.” That's a point of view shared by Bob Holmes, another 21-year veteran of the post, with 12 years at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia; three years at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts; and five years and counting at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. “Learn to adapt your leadership style to the different people you work with,” he says. “If you assume everyone is going to make it easy for you, you're really in the wrong job.”

Build a trustworthy staff. In my conversations with deans, I've



found that they almost all offer the same advice: Don't even try to do everything yourself. It's impossible. "A good dean has a team

of associate deans and staff who take care of the details so the dean can be thinking more strategically, working with donors, and planning for changes," says Craig McAllaster, dean of the Crummer Graduate School of Management at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, since 2000. "A strong staff allows the dean to avoid getting bogged down in the minutiae, like 'I don't like the color of my office' or 'I want to teach on a different day,'" he says. "You can't be a control freak and be a good dean."

Share your vision. Unlike leaders in other organizations, deans have the added challenge of dealing with tenured faculty and other vagaries of academia. Therefore, it's important to encourage all faculty to invest in a shared vision for the institution's future to ensure the most productive environment possible. "Your vision must be shared with—and by—the faculty," says Long. "Faculty collaborate and cooperate when they have a superordinate goal, such as to raise money or to become accredited."

I agree that a shared vision and sense of purpose not only unify a faculty and staff, but also give a dean a bit more leverage. "If you clearly define your values—say, teaching excellence and research—it gives a dean a little more control if a faculty member is legitimately not meeting the requirements," McAllaster says. "If a faculty member says, 'You're only saying that because you don't like me,' you can point to your defined requirements and show how he's not measuring up."

Establish outside pursuits. The ability to create external initiatives often helps perpetuate a dean's implementation and maintenance phases. Supporting programs in the local community, creating international partnerships, or participating in professional assignments away from campus, such as deans' conferences, corporate visits, and, of course, personal vacations, can give the dean a much-needed refresher. They also serve as mandatory coping mechanisms to help avoid stagnation. "I'm an avid golfer, I like to read and reflect, and I like to hike and fish. I also like to go to deans' conferences to share stories and hear how others are doing," says Holmes. "I always come back with a new outlook."

Reinvent yourself regularly. Ironically, success can be a mixed blessing for a business school dean. Once a goal is accom-

plished, a dean can stagnate in the position if another goal isn't chosen immediately to replace it. "Deans who have long, successful terms have something in common: Every two or three years, they refocus and reinvent themselves," says Bob Reid, dean of the College of Business at James Madison University for eight years. "Things may become routine, but I don't want to become bogged down in that. If we continue to reinvent ourselves, the whole enterprise moves forward and is successful."

Learn to manage your bosses. Perhaps nothing causes more turbulence in a dean's job than changes in leadership at the top of a university's administration. A business school dean's plan for fund raising and curriculum development can be quickly derailed by a new administration with other agendas in mind. Therefore, the ability to "manage upper management" might be one of a dean's most crucial skills.

"We teach so many courses on how to manage other people, as if everyone you work with is your subordinate," Holmes says. "But you also have to figure out how best to work with your own superiors, supporting their vision, initiatives, and plans for the university, while at the same time accomplishing your vision for your own school. You must learn to adapt your leadership style to the people you work with—and for. It's sometimes difficult to strike that balance."

John Kraft, a veteran business dean at the University of Florida in Gainesville, addressed the same point when I interviewed him for AACSB International's documentary video, "Deans on Deaning: Secrets of Success." He emphasizes that it's important to work with the central administration *and* be an advocate for the business school. "You're the representative of your school," he says. "You're not there to represent the central administration."

Learn from failure. In the end, the effectiveness and longevity of a dean's tenure depend on the strength of her survival skills, says Donna Motilla. After a year as interim dean at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania and five years in her current position as dean of the business school at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia, Motilla has learned that failure teaches survival skills perhaps even better than success does.

"There is value in failure if you learn from it. Every day in the office is an opportunity to excel. Every academic year, the faculty as a whole has a new set of goals to achieve. You're never finished," says Motilla. "You set a goal, you achieve that goal, and you always know what your next goal is. It's like going up a long staircase—you just keep going up."

Exit gracefully. When a business school hires a dean, it's typ-



The Best Job of All

It's true that the job of business dean has become more complex in the decades since I first became a dean. Serious budget constraints, faculty shortages, the demands of changing technologies, com-

petition among schools, pressures for higher national rankings, changing accreditation expectations, less sympathetic central administration outlooks, and the increasing emphasis on external fund raising have combined to make the dean's job a tougher one.

But the business dean still has the best position on campus. It's even more fun than the university president's. Like a business school dean, the president gets the opportunity to wine and dine with stakeholders and community leaders, enjoy the success of high-quality programs, and hear the praise of the business community. The president, however, must also worry about hepatitis outbreaks, student mental health, campus parking, and the university athletic program. By comparison, a business school dean's worries are not so all-encompassing.

ically looking for someone to fill the position for the long term. But that may not be the best thing for the university—or the dean. In academia, where tenure is well-established and inertia dictates that things at rest tend to stay at rest, regular changes in the guard may be a good prescription for long-term success.

Many deans believe that self-imposed term limits may be a requirement for the health of both individual and business school. "Deans often go stagnant if they stay too long in their jobs. I think 12 years is too long to stay in the same dean's position. Six to eight years is more ideal—long enough to get things in place, but not too long to lose your vision," Holmes says. That's why, when Holmes resigned his post at James Madison University, he told his superiors that "12 years was enough." When he moved on to a dean's position at Babson College, Holmes believes he revitalized his career by moving to a new school, while JMU enjoyed the benefit of new leadership.

So, what are the longevity secrets of my AACSB New Deans Seminar classmates Dave Billings and Bud Barnes? Dave reminds every dean that, "This is a political appointment." Because the dean serves at the pleasure of a number of stakeholder groups, he says, staying in good communication with those groups is crucial to a dean's survival. Keeping that communication honest is Bud's best advice. "Building trust by being honest," he says, "pays high rewards." His advice is reaffirmed by Frank Navratil, dean of John Carroll University's Boler School of Business in University Heights, Ohio, since 1985. "Don't ever lie," he says matter-of-factly. "If people feel you have a tendency to bend the truth or out-and-out lie, you're dead."

For me, being a dean was a great experience, fun just about every day. I never planned a long tenure, nor did I reach the final two stages of the career cycle. After 18 years, I continued to enjoy the position because I was able to periodically refocus myself through new initiatives and external activities. I wish other business deans the same good fortune. **Z**

In addition, deans must be prepared to make unpopular decisions that are essential to school interests, says Joe Alutto, dean of business at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business in Columbus since 1991. This means, Alutto says in the "Deans on Deaning" video, "A dean has to be prepared to lose the position." Rather than an indication of "suicidal" tendencies, such courage is an important factor for a dean's success.

Never burn your bridges. Ridley Gros has been business dean at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, three times: 1971 to 1983, 1992 to 2002, and 2003 to the present. His 20-plus years' tenure in the position has been interrupted by nine years as a vice-president at Nicholls State and by one year in retirement. For the past three years, Ridley has been one of the lead presenters in AACSB International's New Deans Seminar. His final session, "Changing with the Changes," ends with sound advice: "Never burn your bridges." His career history underscores that the conditions under which a dean leaves the position should always be positive, so that he or she is remembered as a productive team player.

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