

# STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP: BUILDING A DIVERSE AND TALENTED LEADERSHIP TEAM

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## INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, I left the practice of law to become a law professor. It was not an easy decision: I loved practicing law, and I was good at it. Yet I sought a new adventure in teaching, where I could train and mentor the lawyers and leaders of the future—students who would become my colleagues in the legal profession. My transition from practice to teaching—and later from teaching to law school administration—was challenging but rewarding, and every obstacle and setback provided valuable knowledge that prepared me for the road ahead. Looking back, I would not trade my professional journey for the world.

Still, I would have done some things differently, especially during my time as dean. I decided to become a dean because I saw a need for change and innovation in legal education, and I wanted to help implement that change. Guided by that polestar, I have made some good decisions, and some less so, and I have learned much along the way.

Serving as a law school dean is difficult. The position requires consistent strategic focus, but also flexibility; steady patience, but the ability to move quickly when needed; empathy and compassion, but also a thick skin; creativity and innovation, but also respect for tradition; and above all solid judgment. The job is not for the faint-hearted, and it cannot be done well alone. A good dean needs an effective leadership team.

This essay is about building an effective leadership team, and it is structured around four premises:

**Premise One:** Law school deanships today are very different than they were only a few years ago. Legal education has changed dramatically over the past decade in ways that make the law school dean's job much more challenging.

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**Premise Two:** Because of these changes, success as a law school dean today requires building and maintaining an effective leadership team. This is not a new truth, but recent changes in legal education amplify this truth.

**Premise Three:** To build and maintain a strong leadership team, today's law school dean must cultivate a servant leadership mindset for themselves and their leadership team.

**Premise Four:** There are clear and specific steps that a law school dean can take to build and retain an effective leadership team.

Each premise is addressed in greater detail below. My thoughts and reflections are based largely on my own experience, and my list of steps for building an effective leadership team is not exhaustive. I offer my thoughts in the hope that they might prove useful to anyone serving or contemplating serving as a dean.

PREMISE ONE: LAW SCHOOL DEANSHIPS ARE VERY DIFFERENT TODAY THAN THEY WERE ONLY A FEW YEARS AGO

Serving as a law school dean has never been easy, but it is more challenging today than only a few years ago. As I wrote about in a previous essay in the *Toledo Law Review*,<sup>1</sup> U.S. legal education remained remarkably stable for the better part of a century, from the early 1900s until 2011 (just a few years after the financial crisis of 2008).<sup>2</sup> Law school applications and enrollment numbers were generally strong, and because of the strong demand for legal education, law schools typically enjoyed budgetary surpluses.

Largely due to this strong enrollment and financial stability, law school deanships lasted significantly longer than they do today, and new deans had time to learn on the job. While law schools certainly experienced change and progress in many ways—most notably in the growth of experiential education, progress toward gender equity, and increased racial and ethnic diversity for student bodies, faculty, and staff—these changes did not significantly affect the financial stability of law schools. Stability and predictability were the order of the day.

That stability and predictability is now gone. Legal education—and higher education more generally—is in a state of growing crisis. Law school revenues are down, and structural financial deficits abound. Public confidence in higher education is declining,<sup>3</sup> and applications to law schools have declined significantly

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1. Gregory W. Bowman, *The Rise of the Creative Law School*, 50 U. TOL. L. REV. 255 (2019).

2. *Id.* at 257.

3. See, e.g., Jessica Blake, *American Confidence in Higher Ed Hits Historic Low*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (July 11, 2023), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/financial-health/2023/07/11/american-confidence-higher-ed-hits-historic-low>; Zachary Schermele, *Public Trust in Higher Ed Has Plummeted: Yes, Again*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC. (July 11, 2023), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/public-trust-in-higher-ed-has-plummeted-yes-again>; Michael T. Nietzel, *Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Sinks to a New Low*, FORBES (July 11, 2023, 6:49 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2023/07/11/americans-confidence-in-higher-education-sinks-to-a-new-low/?sh=17438c4f5341>.

in recent years, despite a modest rebound since 2017.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade some U.S. law schools have closed;<sup>5</sup> others have been disaccredited by the American Bar Association;<sup>6</sup> and two law schools have merged,<sup>7</sup> with at least one more merger currently in the works.<sup>8</sup> During my time as dean I have seen law school hiring

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4. See *Admission Trends: Applicants, Admitted Applicants, Matriculants, & Applications*, L. SCH. ADMISSION COUNCIL, <https://report.lsac.org/View.aspx?Report=AdmissionTrendsApplicantsAdmitApps> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (providing application data for 2019-2023); *Historical Data Archive*, L. SCH. ADMISSION COUNCIL, <https://report.lsac.org/View.aspx?Report=AdmissionTrendsApplicantsAdmitApps> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (providing application data for 2004-2018).

5. Law Schools that have closed include Arizona Summit Law School, Charlotte School of Law, Florida Coastal School of Law, Indiana Tech Law School, Savannah Law School, Valparaiso Law School, and Whittier Law School. Two other law schools—Ave Maria School of Law and Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Law School—have closed campuses. See Henry Webb et al., *Accreditation Information Produced by United States Law Schools to the American Bar Association Should Be Made Available to the Public from Both Law and Policy Perspectives*, 34 LOY. CONSUMER L. REV. 79, 91-92 (2022) (noting closures of Arizona Summit, Charlotte, Indiana Tech, Valparaiso, and Whittier law schools); Don Macauley, *Savannah Law School is Closing After Seven Years*, NAT'L JURIST (Mar. 23, 2018, 10:08 AM), <https://nationaljurist.com/national-jurist-magazine/savannah-law-school-closing-after-seven-years/>; Stephanie Francis Ward, *Are More Law Schools Needed in Areas Where InfiLaw Campuses Closed*, ABA J. (May 11, 2022), <https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/are-more-law-schools-needed-in-areas-where-infilaw-campuses-closed> (discussing Florida Coastal and Arizona Summit closures—law schools operated by InfiLaw, a private equity firm owned by Sterling Capital Partners); Nathan Bomey, *Cooley Law School Closing Ann Arbor Campus*, DET. FREE PRESS (Oct. 9, 2014), <https://www.freep.com/story/money/business/michigan/2014/10/09/cooley-law-school-closing-ann-arbor-campus/16960617/> (discussing the closure of Cooley Law School's campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan and noting that the campus was formerly occupied by Ave Maria School of Law); Katherine Mangan, *Conflict Over Relocation Divides a Catholic Law School*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC. (May 18, 2007), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/conflict-over-relocation-divides-a-catholic-law-school/> (discussing Ave Maria's relocation from its Ann Arbor campus to Southwest Florida).

6. Law schools disaccredited recently by the American Bar Association are Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, California and University of La Verne College of Law in Ontario, California. See Webb et al., *supra* note 5, at 92; *State Bar of California Accreditation*, UNIV. OF LA VERNE, <https://law.laverne.edu/accreditation/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (noting that the La Verne College of Law was disaccredited by the ABA); Lyle Moran, *It's Official: Thomas Jefferson Law Will Lose its National Accreditation*, VOICE OF SAN DIEGO (Nov. 21, 2019), <https://voiceofsandiego.org/2019/11/21/its-official-thomas-jefferson-law-school-will-lose-its-national-accreditation/>.

7. In 2015, Hamline University School of Law and William Mitchell College of Law in Minneapolis, Minnesota announced their intent to merge, and the merger was granted acquiescence by the American Bar Association later that year. See *William Mitchell, Hamline Merger Approved*, PRELAW (Dec. 9, 2015), <https://nationaljurist.com/prelaw/william-mitchell-hamline-merger-approved/>; Adam Wahlberg, *Why William Mitchell and Hamline Law Had to Merge*, MINNPOST (Feb. 18, 2015), <https://www.minnpost.com/education/2015/02/why-william-mitchell-and-hamline-law-had-merge/>; Jordan Weissman, *The Great Law School Bust Is About to Claim Its First Victim*, SLATE (Feb. 18, 2015), <https://slate.com/business/2015/02/hamline-william-mitchell-merger-the-law-school-bust-claims-its-first-victim.html>.

8. Penn State's president announced in late 2022 that the university's two law schools, Penn State Law at University Park, Pennsylvania and Penn State Dickinson Law in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, would be reunited into one law school. Dickinson Law was acquired by Penn State in 1997, and the two campuses were operated as one law school with two campuses until 2014, when they became separately operated and ABA accredited—so in an important sense, this merger is more of a return to a previous model than a combining of separate institutions. See Karen Sloan, *Penn State Moves to Consolidate its Two Law Schools*, REUTERS (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/legal/>

stagnate at many schools, and I have watched law schools eliminate faculty and staff positions. More changes are certainly coming. A looming enrollment cliff for higher education promises to make matters even worse.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the landscape for legal education has changed dramatically in a remarkably short period of time. Law school budgets are now much tighter and sometimes in the red. Law schools compete for an unpredictable and often smaller national law school applicant pool. Law school curricula and programs need to adapt to these pressures but change frequently faces institutional resistance. New deans enjoy little to no honeymoon period and have scant margin for error: the median length of service for sitting deans in late 2023 was less than three and a half years.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of whether a new dean arrives from outside legal education, is promoted internally from the faculty, or comes from another law school, the dean will face urgent and significant challenges that must be addressed thoughtfully and decisively.

PREMISE TWO: SUCCESS AS A LAW SCHOOL DEAN TODAY REQUIRES BUILDING  
AND MAINTAINING AN EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

The changed landscape for legal education raises the stakes for any law school dean. A new dean should articulate their leadership style and goals clearly before officially starting, and they must build and maintain a strong and high-functioning leadership team in order to survive and succeed.

To be fair, having a good leadership team was already important for law school deans' success before the recent changes in legal education. Today, however, a strong leadership team is both an operational and strategic necessity. The stakes are much higher, the margin for error is much smaller, and the

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egalindustry/penn-state-moves-consolidate-its-two-law-schools-2022-11-30/; Josh Moyer, 'Reunification' of Penn State's Law Schools Takes Next Step; Set to Reduce Faculty, Staff, CTR. DAILY NEWS (Aug. 15, 2023), <https://www.centredaily.com/news/local/education/penn-state/article278260078.html>; Christine Charnosky, *It's Official: Penn State's Two Law Schools Will Be Reunited*, THE LEGAL INTELLIGENCER (Aug. 14, 2023), <https://www.law.com/thelegalintelligencer/2023/08/14/its-official-penn-states-two-law-schools-will-be-reunited/>.

9. Articles discussing the pending enrollment cliff and the impact on higher education abound. Representative articles include the following: ANTHONY SCHUETTE, NAVIGATING THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF 1-3 (June 2023), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED628984.pdf> (discussing the causes and possible institutional responses to the enrollment cliff); Liam Knox, *Grasping for a Foothold on the Enrollment Cliff*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (May 12, 2023), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/revenue-strategies/2023/05/12/grasping-foothold-enrollment-cliff> (discussing differing views of how, and whether, higher education enrollment can rebound following enrollment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic); Jamie Merisotis, *The College Problem in America is About More Than Cost*, FORBES (Mar. 15, 2023, 10:10 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiemerisotis/2023/03/15/the-college-problem-in-america-is-about-more-than-cost/?sh=6710647034c7> (discussing other factors contributing to college enrollment declines); Bryan C. Harvey, *Teetering on the Demographic Cliff, Part 1: Prepare Now for the Challenging Times Ahead*, 49 PLANNING FOR HIGHER EDUC. 1, 1 (July-Sept. 2021) (addressing the impact of declining birthrates and the reduced pool of eighteen-year-old prospective new college students after 2025).

10. *Average/Median Length of Service—Current Deans*, MISS. COLL.: ROSENBLATT'S DEANS DATABASE, <https://lawdeans.com/stats.php> (last visited Jan. 5, 2024).

difference between success and failure is much greater: success may mean the law school survives and thrives, whereas failure may mean the law school shrinks in size or relevance, and perhaps even shuts its doors.

A strong leadership team is *operationally* necessary because the daily scope of the dean's responsibilities touch upon nearly everything at the law school: academic affairs, admissions, alumni relations, bar exam performance, budgeting and finance, career services, diversity and inclusion, events, experiential learning, facilities management, faculty relations, fundraising, grant funding, human resources, library matters, marketing and communications, registrar and bursar functions, student life and wellness, university relations, and more. The dean needs senior personnel who are (or can become) experts in these areas.

A strong leadership team is *strategically* necessary because the dean, in concert with the leadership team, must stay closely attuned to the law school's institutional culture and challenges and must understand the regional and national macroeconomic forces at play upon the law school. The dean and leadership team must be creative and innovative in planning for and charting the law school's future, and they must remain highly engaged with constituencies that will shape the law school's future—including alumni, applicants, current students, donors, faculty and staff, university colleagues, other law schools and entities involved in legal education, and the general public.

Without a talented and dedicated leadership team, the law school dean will fail or burn out—and most likely both. With a strong leadership team, the dean can fulfill their many operational and strategic responsibilities. The dean also may find, as I have, that with a strong leadership team the job of dean becomes much more enjoyable and satisfying, even in the face of many challenges.

PREMISE THREE: TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN A STRONG LEADERSHIP TEAM,  
TODAY'S LAW SCHOOL DEAN MUST CULTIVATE A SERVANT LEADERSHIP  
MINDSET FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR LEADERSHIP TEAM

I firmly believe that fostering and maintaining a servant leadership mindset is essential to a law school dean's success. Servant leadership, a term coined and popularized by leadership studies pioneer Robert K. Greenleaf,<sup>11</sup> has been described as follows:

Servant leadership is a leadership style that prioritizes the growth, well-being, and empowerment of employees. It aims to foster an inclusive environment that enables everyone in the organization to thrive as their authentic self. Whereas traditional leadership focuses on the success of the company or organization, servant leadership puts employees first to grow the organization through their commitment and

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11. ROBERT K. GREENLEAF, *THE SERVANT AS LEADER* (1970) (republished by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2015); ROBERT K. GREENLEAF, *SERVANT LEADERSHIP: A JOURNEY INTO THE NATURE OF LEGITIMATE POWER AND GREATNESS* (1977).

engagement. When implemented correctly, servant leadership can help foster trust, accountability, growth, and inclusion in the workplace.<sup>12</sup>

Servant leadership provides a moral and operational filter through which a dean can view and prioritize their work. The concept of servant leadership is not new, but it remains powerful. Most deans I know—both in law schools and in other academic disciplines—follow the principles of servant leadership in one form or another. What I wish to emphasize is that by (a) intentionally committing to a servant leadership approach, (b) explicitly explaining the approach to others, and (c) using servant leadership values to guide decision making and shape a leadership style, it is possible to amplify the impact of servant leadership. Intentionality and explicit statements are a powerful combination for maximizing impact.<sup>13</sup> Intentional and expressly stated servant leadership does not guarantee success—but without it, success will be much harder.

Moreover, without a servant leadership mindset, it will be difficult for the law school dean to build and maintain an effective leadership team. It is possible of course, but in my view far less likely—and I believe that any success achieved almost certainly will be at a diminished level.

PREMISE FOUR: THERE ARE CLEAR AND SPECIFIC STEPS THAT A LAW SCHOOL DEAN CAN TAKE TO BUILD AND RETAIN AN EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

The following steps for building and retaining an effective leadership team are derived from my own experience as a law school dean over the past decade: times when I have made the right choice through intentional decision making; instances where I have made the right decision due more to luck than planning; and times when I have made mistakes. I offer this non-exhaustive list in the hope that others can benefit and amplify their success.

It is important to note that I refer to “effective” leadership teams, not “successful” leadership teams. Success depends on multiple factors, many of which may be beyond the dean’s control, including cultural and macroeconomic factors transforming American higher education. Building an effective leadership team, however, is within the dean’s grasp, and effectiveness is the proper focus.

*Step One: Understand What a Leadership Team is and What it is Not*

One of the most important things to understand when working to build and retain an effective leadership team is what a “leadership team” is and what it is not. A leadership team is a group of coworkers who report to a leader (directly or

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12. Sarah K. White, *What Is Servant Leadership? A Philosophy for People-First Leadership*, SHRM (Feb. 28, 2022), <https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/Pages/servant-leadership-.aspx>. For discussion of servant leadership and new generations of employees and students, see Paul Falcone, *Servant Leadership for a New Generation*, SHRM (June 17, 2021), <https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/Pages/blog-servant-leader-falcone.aspx>.

13. For a discussion of intentionality, see Gregory W. Bowman, *The Feng Shui of Study Abroad Programs*, 20 J. TRANSNAT’L LEGAL ISSUES 20, 27 (2012).

indirectly) in their administrative capacities and who have specific portfolios—which in the case of law schools are portfolios such as academic affairs, admissions, alumni relations, career services, diversity and inclusion, experiential learning, faculty research and development, financial aid, library, marketing and communications, student life and wellness, and so on. This is not an exclusive list.

This definition of “leadership team” leads to an important observation: the law school’s faculty as a whole is not a leadership team. Rather, a law school faculty is an academic governing body, akin to the U.S. Congress or a state legislature. The faculty’s role is central and essential, both for academic governance<sup>14</sup> and for providing teaching, research, and service—the very reasons any law school exists<sup>15</sup>—but a faculty is not designed to administrate. The faculty oversees and governs the academic program, and it delegates and provides guidance to the dean and leadership team. The dean and the leadership team, in turn, answer to the faculty. To put it in servant leadership terms, the dean and the dean’s leadership team serve the faculty as a core constituency.<sup>16</sup>

What the dean needs for operational effectiveness, then, is a leadership team comprised of faculty and staff administrators who have responsibility for and expertise in various operational and strategic areas of law school activity. Leadership team members report to the dean for this administrative work, and with the dean, this leadership team works to advance the mission of the law school, in service to the faculty and other constituencies of the law school.

### *Step Two: Build Your Own Leadership Team*

This step might be easily misconstrued, so I first want to explain what I am not saying. I am not saying that a new dean should replace most or all existing senior staff upon becoming dean—in fact, I think that would be a terrible idea. Usually, a new dean inherits many excellent and talented senior staff members,

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14. See *Membership & Core Values*, ASS’N OF AM. L. SCHS., <https://www.aals.org/about/membership/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (stating, in Core Value 1, the value of maintaining “[a] faculty composed primarily of full-time teachers/scholars who constitute a *self-governing* intellectual community engaged in the creation and dissemination of knowledge about law, legal processes and legal systems, and who are devoted to fostering justice and public service”) (emphasis added); *2023-2024 Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools*, AM. BAR ASS’N, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/standards/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/standards/) (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (stating the significant role of the dean and faculty in governance and policy in Standard 201: Law School Governance, and describing faculty obligations in Standard 404: Responsibilities of Full-Time Faculty).

15. *2023-2024 Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools*, AM. BAR ASS’N, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/standards/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/standards/) (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (listing, in Standard 404(a), faculty obligations for teaching, scholarship and service); *Membership & Core Values*, ASS’N OF AM. L. SCHS., <https://www.aals.org/about/membership/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (stating, as Core Values 4 and 5, the importance of “Excellent scholarship” and “Excellent teaching,” respectively).

16. The Core Values of the Association of American Law Schools reinforce this view. See *Membership & Core Values*, ASS’N OF AM. L. SCHS., <https://www.aals.org/about/membership/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2024) (stating, in Core Value 8, the importance of having “[c]ompetent and professional staff to support the mission of the law school”).

and the presumption should be to retain people in their existing positions. Retention of talented senior staff will provide cultural stability—the importance of which should never be underestimated. New deans cause uncertainty and stress simply because they are new, and expressly keeping the status quo is a wise first move for a new dean. Moreover, new deans—especially those who have arrived from another institution—need the knowledge, perspective, and expertise of existing senior staff in order to succeed.

*a. Decide on the Size of Your Leadership Team*

That being said, it is still important for a dean to build their *own* leadership team over time, and to decide how large or small that team should be. The size of the team will be affected by various factors, including the size of the law school; its current administrative structure; the complexity and scope of its programs, challenges, and opportunities; and the preference of the law school dean. Based on my experience as a dean in today's era of upheaval in higher education, I have opted for a larger leadership team of ten or more senior staff, in order to engage more effectively in robust strategic planning and action work, and to leverage the abilities of many talented colleagues.

It is important to remember that the demands and needs of the law school—and the skills required to meet those demands and needs—likely will change over time due to external pressures, changing priorities, strategic initiatives, and employee turnover. These factors underscore the importance of building and maintaining an effective leadership team for the law school.

*b. Three Team-Building Strategies*

With existing senior staff, building your own leadership team can be accomplished by working hard to establish interpersonal work relationships with every senior staff member; by figuring out what each senior staffer professionally wants and needs and then addressing those wants and needs; and by clearly developing and articulating a vision and plan for the leadership team. If the dean's vision and plan offer valuable career opportunities for existing senior staff, these staff members can become professionally and personally invested in the dean's vision and plan. These senior staff members then can become part of the dean's own leadership team, without having changed positions.

Another way for a dean to build their leadership team is to hire new people into positions that become vacant. New leadership team members have no history of doing the job differently under a prior dean at that law school, and their position is due to the dean's decision to hire them and build a relationship with them. These new team members become part of the dean's leadership team from day one in their new position.

A third way, and one I like, is to find ways to promote existing high-quality personnel (staff or faculty) to new administrative positions or provide opportunities for strong senior staff members to transition to different senior staff positions (existing or newly created) that provide them with new or expanded professional opportunities. In some ways, this approach offers the best of both



worlds: these leadership team members already have valuable experience and expertise at the institution, yet they are in different positions that offer fresh opportunities. These leadership team members are thus both new and not new, and they have enhanced professional opportunities because of the dean's belief in and support of them.

Regardless of how individuals join the dean's leadership team, when the team members are all aligned with the dean's leadership vision—and when the dean's leadership vision is developed and refined through the input of leadership team members—this collaborative alignment amplifies the vision through the consistent and combined work of the leadership team. Building—and then maintaining—an aligned leadership team takes significant time and constant effort, but when it is successful, the entire law school benefits.

### *c. Recruit Like a College Coach*

There is another aspect of building an effective leadership team that must be kept in mind at all times: the dean should approach building a leadership team like college coaches approach athletic recruitment. The dean is not just filling a position and checking a box: the dean is looking for talent that can be leveraged—both for the good of the institution and for the individual being recruited. There must always be an attractive and real benefit to each leadership team member or prospect. Individuals will not take on a leadership team role without some benefit to them, nor should they. Rather, strong leadership team members are often attracted by the opportunity to develop new skills, advance their careers, and support the law school's mission.

A corollary to this principle is that sometimes, positions should be modified to reflect a particular team member's strengths. Do not try to fit square pegs into round holes. Instead, change leadership team positions when appropriate to better fit (and leverage) a team member's talent and give that team member growth opportunities.

In fact, I believe that deans should follow this same approach when hiring for any staff or faculty position at the law school. If a dean approaches every job search as an opportunity for the law school to hire exceptional talent and advance someone's career, those personnel searches will tend to be more successful. If a team member decides to move on to another institution—and it will happen—the dean should support that move as well. Individuals do not stay in the same position forever (which is another reason to give people growth opportunities without having to leave). If staff and faculty leave their positions on good terms and with the dean's support, the open position will be much more attractive for prospective candidates. Taking this approach is also simply the right thing to do. An effective servant dean supports the career growth of their leadership team members.

### *Step Three: Build a Diverse and Talented Leadership Team*

Having a diverse leadership team that includes people with different world views, lived experiences, and backgrounds is essential to any dean's success. A dean should strive to assemble a diverse leadership team and work on building and

maintaining trust among team members. It is well documented that diverse leadership teams can achieve better outcomes.<sup>17</sup> As discussed in the next two subsections of this essay, having a diverse and talented leadership team helps in the development of a clear strategic mission and vision, as well as in promoting trust and preventing blind spots by providing different perspectives on any issue faced by the dean and the law school.

Moreover, in my experience, it is a profoundly rewarding experience to work with a diverse leadership team comprised of talented and dedicated people who trust and respect one another, and who are willing to respectfully disagree as they work together to serve the institution. Whether any one person's views prevail ultimately does not matter. What matters is that blind spots have been avoided, decision making has improved, and the law school is better led and served.

#### *Step Four: Develop a Clear Strategic Mission and Vision*

It has always been important for a law school dean to develop a sound strategic mission and vision for their law school, but the rapid change occurring in legal education today makes strategic mission and vision development both more imperative and more difficult than ever. Whereas law schools before 2011 existed in a world characterized by financial stability and general consensus about what law schools should be and do, today's law schools do not enjoy that stability and consensus. Many law schools face enormous financial pressures, as well as cultural and sometimes political ones. Efforts to improve financial stability can create tensions with traditional missions and values if sufficient care is not taken.

It is imperative, therefore, for the dean and leadership team to develop a clear strategic mission and vision for the law school, in communication and collaboration with various constituencies—the alumni, faculty, practicing bar, students, home university, and more. The mission and vision should honor the past work and accomplishments of the law school yet still look to the future. Focus could be placed, for example, on addressing certain needs of society; on expanding experiential learning opportunities; on developing innovations in legal education; or some combination of these and other elements. The development of the strategic mission and vision must be a team exercise, which is yet another reason why it is vitally important to have an effective leadership with diverse talents, experiences, and perspectives.

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17. See, e.g., Vivian Hunt et al., *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*, MCKINSEY & CO. (May 19, 2020), <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>; Vivian Hunt et al., *Delivering Through Diversity*, MCKINSEY & CO. (Jan. 18, 2018), <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>; Vivian Hunt et al., *Why Diversity Matters*, MCKINSEY & CO. (Jan. 1, 2015), <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/why-diversity-matters>. See also Rocío Lorenza et al., *How Diverse Leadership Teams Boost Innovation*, BOS. CONSULTING GRP. (Nov. 2018), [https://boston-consulting-group-brightspot.s3.amazonaws.com/img-src/BCG-How-Diverse-Leadership-Teams-Boost-Innovation-Jan-2018\\_tcm9-207935.pdf](https://boston-consulting-group-brightspot.s3.amazonaws.com/img-src/BCG-How-Diverse-Leadership-Teams-Boost-Innovation-Jan-2018_tcm9-207935.pdf) (discussing benefits of diverse leadership teams on financial performance of private sector entities).

The strategic mission and vision that the leadership team develops must be useful enough to provide clarity, yet flexible enough to allow for adjustment. The strategic mission and vision should be, in a sense, like a financial plan that offers a course of action but gets adjusted along the way. It also is useful to think of the strategic mission and vision as a visual filter: they can be focused on particular issues or aspects of law school operations to provide clarity. Some programs and possibilities for action will pop into clear focus as distinctly relevant to the strategic mission and vision; others will be filtered out and shown to be less relevant. In this way, the strategic mission and vision can facilitate effective and clear planning and action.

*Step Five: Promote Trust and Encourage Constructive Disagreement*

Constructive disagreement is essential to effective teamwork—and it cannot occur without trust and respect among leadership team members. If every member of a leadership team has the same views, then the team, and the dean, will have blind spots in their work. There can be great comfort in always (or mostly) agreeing, but the leadership team’s effectiveness will be severely impaired. The team and dean run the risk of engaging in groupthink.<sup>18</sup> That would be problematic in the most stable of times, but in times of crisis, blind spots and groupthink are extremely dangerous. It will be harder to predict challenges, and when challenges do occur, the leadership team will be reactive, not proactive, and possibly defensive as well. That sort of response is always unhealthy for the wellbeing of the entire law school community, including members of the leadership team and the dean.

It is important, therefore, for the dean to consciously recognize—and appreciate—that their opinion is one of many, and to model trust and receptiveness to disagreement. What matters is whether the team is working effectively, not whether any one member of the team (including the dean) is right. In fact, it can be liberating—on a talented team filled with people who trust one another—to allow oneself to be wrong and be fine with that. We support the right to be wrong for our law students in the classroom; why not do it for ourselves as we work together to find effective answers to hard problems?

There is one other significant benefit to trusting and respectful conflict. While the buck may stop on the dean’s desk, having a leadership team characterized by trust and willingness to debate and disagree means that the dean may feel less alone in their leadership position. Deanships can be intensely isolating, and the resulting loneliness can be challenging, especially for a newly minted dean. Building a

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18. The term “groupthink,” first coined by psychologist Irving Janis, is defined as the “nondeliberate suppression of critical thoughts as a result of internalization of the group’s norms.” Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink*, *PSYCH. TODAY MAG.* 84-89 (1971). The danger of groupthink is not that group members will consciously restrain from making objections to proposals from others in the group; rather, the danger is that team members “will think the proposal is a good one, without attempting to carry out a careful, critical scrutiny of the pros and cons of the alternatives.” In a groupthink situation, team members also are more likely to dismiss any misgivings they may have as not relevant, which lowers the quality of team performance and decision making. *Id.*

leadership team characterized by trust and candid dialogue supports the dean's personal wellness by reducing personal and professional isolation.

*Step Six: Focus on Results, Not Effort*

The importance of focusing on results, not effort, can be a hard lesson to keep in mind in higher education. Too often, deans and other leaders in higher education default to focusing on the effort made, not the results achieved—and legal education does not have a strong history of data-based decision making. Law school faculty and staff members typically work very hard, and it can be difficult for a dean to turn attention from the dedicated efforts of their leadership team members (the inputs) to the results of those efforts (the outputs).

In today's rapidly changing legal education landscape, however, it is vitally important to set specific goals for each area of the law school's operations, and then to work toward achieving those goals in furtherance of the law school's strategic mission and vision. Some goals may not be met, and there may be good reasons for that, but focusing on results (and adjusting goals over time) is essential for success. As the saying goes, if you don't know where you are going, you are guaranteed not to get there.

Goals for various law school operations need to be reasonable and achievable. When clear and thoughtfully developed goals are set, then the results—almost without exception—are stronger outcomes. One can succeed without setting clear goals, but it is hard to measure that success. Without goals, how can one determine whether a success was, in fact, only partial success—versus what might have been achieved with explicitly set and stated goals? A lack of clear goals also tends to impede effective communication and coordination among leadership team members, because there are no targets to discuss and work toward.

*Step Seven: Engage in Efficient Time Management for Both Your Team and You*

As any dean in any higher education field will tell you, the volume and pace of a senior administrator's work takes getting used to. Deans must juggle multiple constituencies, events, emergencies, and unexpected challenges—while engaging in law school administrative work and strategic leadership. In addition, as one of my mentors once told me, deans (and college presidents) really have two jobs: the day job of running an institution, and the evening and weekend job of being an ambassador at events.

Effective time management is therefore essential. Many time management books have been written and many approaches have been developed—too many to detail here. I will confine my remarks to some personal observations. Nothing I say here is original, but everything I list below has worked for me.

*a. Regarding the Dean's Own Time Management*

- Spend 20-30 minutes each day on managing your calendar and to-do list. It may seem like it takes a lot of time, but it will save time and avoid unnecessary fire drills.

- Give someone (your assistant if you have one) access to your calendar and the ability to manage it.
- On your calendar, block off time at least three days per week to work on strategic projects or urgent matters that may arise. Guard this time; it will be critical for success.
- Keep your to-do list separate from your calendar. Your calendar shows where to be and why; your to-do list details what needs to get done and when. Make each calendar and to-do list entry detailed enough to provide clarity when reading days or weeks later. I also color code my calendar and my to-do list based on the type of event or task (meeting, planning, personal wellness, etc.), because I find that helps me prioritize my time more effectively.
- Keep your calendar and to-do list with you at all times. I use my smart phone and computer.
- Put wellness time on your calendar. You will not get enough of it otherwise, except by chance—and deans cannot succeed without sufficient focus on their own wellness. Focusing on your own wellness is also important for modeling wellness behavior for others at the law school.

*b. Regarding the Leadership Team's Time Management*

- Schedule regular, recurring one-on-one meetings with members of your leadership team, and do not cancel these meetings. (I might reschedule, but I do not cancel.) I learned several years ago (from an excellent deans' workshop at an Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting) to let each leadership team member set the agendas for these meetings. This gives each team member control of their meetings with me and promotes efficiency.
- Also, hold regular group meetings with the leadership team. These can be touch-base meetings, or there can be scheduled agendas. I find it useful to employ both approaches.

*Step Eight: Support Flexible Work Schedules*

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that remote work and flexible work schedules usually do not reduce employee efficiency—and, in fact, often enhance productivity and morale. It is therefore good policy to be reasonably flexible with work schedules for all law school faculty and staff, including the dean's leadership team. In my view, work schedule flexibility is an important new aspect of effective academic workplace management: flexibility promotes employee wellbeing and facilitates effective faculty and staff recruitment and retention. As long as work is being completed well and in a timely fashion—and as long as student needs are being served, which includes all law school departmental offices being staffed in person during business hours—then flexible work schedules for all faculty and staff, including members of the dean's leadership team, should be the rule and not the exception.

*Step Nine: Never Stop Learning*

This final point is an obvious one, but I state it expressly in the spirit of intentionality. It should be a welcomed point: after all, most law faculty and administrators are in higher education because they value and enjoy learning. I certainly am. To continue learning how to do a job better—to discover how to work smarter, not harder—and to expand one’s skill set as a manager and leader can be a source of deep professional satisfaction. Learning is a key strength for legal educators, and deans can leverage this strength to improve their own leadership and the leadership of their teams.

## CONCLUSION

As I look back at my career so far, I am struck by just how much my current job as dean feels like the law practice I started with. I find satisfaction in that. I am working in service of others, and with my faculty and staff colleagues I am working to support and train my future colleagues in the legal profession. It is a satisfying way to live my professional life.

It is my hope that my thoughts in this essay have been helpful. If anything, my experience as a dean is proof that leadership and management are crafts that can be learned. There is precious little time or leeway for today’s law school deans to learn on the job, but with an effective leadership team, the chances of success—for the dean and the entire law school—will increase dramatically. If a dean chooses their team wisely, works with them closely, and invests in them professionally and personally, the team and school can flourish. Success is never guaranteed, but not having an effective leadership team makes reduced success a certainty and failure a very real possibility.

I will close with a quote from Patrick Lencioni’s classic book on leadership, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, which sums up the impact of effective leadership teams perfectly: “If you get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.”<sup>19</sup> The first step a dean can take toward “rowing in the same direction” is to build and maintain an effective leadership team for the law school.

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19. PATRICK LENCIONI, *THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM* v (John Wiley, 20th ed. 2002).