

The Art of Balancing: The External Role of the Law School Dean

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True education means a healthy exchange of knowledge and ideas – Dr Richard Ferrin, Educationist¹

A Law School mirrors the aspirations of time and generation like any educational center. Even though it primarily serves the needs of the bench, bar and the students, the law school is an important community conduit at a higher level. Its stakeholders also include the state, the community organizations, parents, alumni, students and the teachers. As the leader of the law school, the dean continually absorbs and balances the aspirations of these stakeholders, for the level of stakeholder satisfaction indicates the level of quality of an institution. Such roles of the law school and therefore, of deans as the law school leaders are drastically changing, as the core theme of this conference rightly points out, in a changing scenario of the world. While transcending boundaries of territory, time and discipline, legal education has experienced a sea change. It has snowballed into being a dynamic process, picking up influences from other cultures, disciplines, players and politics. The dean plays a key role in moderating such influences which otherwise may 'sweep one off one's feet'. Thus, it symbolizes the scholar's role of the legendary goose in Indian wisdom, who separates the milk from water. In other words, the quintessential wisdom of envisioning long term role for the legal education should be segregated by the Dean from the fluff of short term goals.

Standing on the threshold of internationalization of education in general and legal education in particular, one is gripped by the 'common law' for the law schools and therefore, for law school deans. The conventional art of balancing the internal and external roles from the static to dynamic phase along with the oscillation between visionary leadership and status quo go on.

Footprints of Law Deans in India

For very long time, the definition of Deans' role in law schools or law colleges affiliated to traditional Indian universities did not specifically provide for any 'external' role. The role envisaged was limited to regulating the work of the department or the law school and protecting and streamlining the academic standards including the teaching, learning and assessment processes. The Dean was a manager donning the mantle of a glorified examiner or case worker solving problems thrown up by a misfit colleague or an aggrieved examinee or a controversial media report. The Dean was usually senior by experience and hence age, either the head of a department or the principal of a law college and was normally elected. Occasionally the Vice Chancellor could nominate the senior teacher as the Dean, irrespective of the status as the head of the institution or department. The role ascribed to the Dean did not

¹ 'Instruction is not education', Interview, Indian Express, 14-4-2009, p.7

ask for any specific competency in human resource management or in academics or research or of being a visionary. It was presumed that their seniority and the votes that they garnered testified to the necessary competencies. One of the lady deans shared that she was seldom consulted, except the token presence in the meetings. She made the best use of her sedentary tenure to publish by making use of the rich library easily accessible thanks to her position. She was a faint flame of innovative ideas. The visionary deans, wherever available, have contributed to path-breaking departures in curricula and methodology in the past.

With the emergence of the national law schools by late 1980s, the directors were at a time vice chancellors, deans and the signatories of the respective law schools. Most of the directors had a strong past in the traditional university set up. Nevertheless, some of them were real leaders in terms of their adaptability, vision and strategy. Combining and balancing the often competing and conflicting profiles of academic and business leadership of the law school was very successfully mastered by at least a few of them. Yet, the important criteria of delegation, coordination and communication within the law school limits and externalizing the law school happen in very few cases.

Ruminations of an unusual track

This author has dabbled in two different shades of law schools within the Indian context: one, for five years in a privately run, temple-based law college affiliated to a traditional university. It had a very personalized approach where the head of the institute acted as the spokes person. Any leadership role on the part of the junior faculty was encouraged but the credit was not shared. As the recent entrant, the author had engaged in training mooters, teaching, and guest lecturing with a strong involvement in community legal service. The community based law reform project on rural agricultural worker women, under the aegis of the national law school had earned the national award. Although the temple-based service motto was encouraging, the very strength was the limitation, where individual excellence was constantly hammered into the submissive shape.

Migrating into the national law school was exhilarating. The law school was the first of its kind where the leader was brilliant, liberal, dynamic and very modern. The leader had profound experience and vision. All dimensions of managerial and leadership abilities were clearly visible. The externalizing aspect in international collaboration and community involvement were very well visualized and encouraged. However, the limitation was glaring in matters of transferring and proliferating the vision in team members, lack of internal audit mechanisms (which was more to do with the policy than the person) and one person doing the most.

The move to Ireland with a job in the National University, showed how a foreigner could alter one's own and others' ways of thinking as a colleague. It enlightened on people skills and people management in terms of stability and personal development. It laid very clear rules for team work, academic growth and excellence. The involvement in research, policy, community work and the professional bodies was found to be uniform across the faculty. The 'space' was respected and protected. Any kind of interference was unheard of. Every faculty was assigned the task based on the strength and career goal. There was silent competitiveness and open encouragement. Engagement with ideas was predominant than mind games and rumor-mongering.

Moving back to India, with the dream of an international research project which did not take off due to political reasons, the author had to settle for a consultant's role in a media institute advising and researching on policy and publications. Side by side, community legal work was taken up. During this period, the deep reflection on incongruous and incompatible possibilities in leadership and management had enriched what was to follow.

A chance meeting with an industrial tycoon in a global meeting paved the way for the author in heading the legal and administrative division of a conglomerate with 4000 workers of 38 nationalities in the Middle East. The role was a lesson in multicultural and scientific context of leadership with clear indicators for performance. Quality was constantly repeated as a mantra. Those two years served as the magical screen with images of the past discontent and failure, being explained with alternative possibilities. A practical, viable, ethical and efficient model of leadership role in one's area of interest and strength was consolidated in those anonymous moments of making, strengthened by the sessions in Toastmasters International. The return to India in 2007, was greeted with the right role at the right time as the Dean in Symbiosis Law School in Pune.

The Symbiosis advantage is distinct and unique with internationalization as the focus decades before it was center-staged. The founder chancellor Dr S. B. Mujumdar has transfused his rich and distinct role as the dean into the veins of this organization with encouragement, selective corrective intervention and space². The law school is under the seventh year of its breaking past from the traditional mould of Pune University.

In the new context, the Dean's external and internal roles are inseparable and complementary as one feeds the other. If reputation, resource and excellence, the three strong pillars of Symbiosis were to be the criteria, the enrichment of these three internally automatically demands these externally. However, the job profile provided in tune with the University Grants Commission Act, does not mention the component of external role, if any.

Perspective on the external role

As the mosaic of experience and context reveals, the important factor for success in Dean's role is acquisition and up gradation of requisite competencies. What are these competencies? Are competencies of teaching and research enough?

The interaction with colleagues outside India and unusual success of certain Deans in India, have confirmed the author's faith in multiple competencies contained within and stretching beyond teaching and research.

These include, the people skills, team skills, communication and most of all, operationalising the strategic vision, in other words, how one acts on the idea of how one wants to see one's department or school. Combining strengths from the unique positioning of the institute, other departments, stakeholder perception and need of the time assessed from the global and national vision document could be the important pointers in the direction. The subtle and the unsaid competency is the nose for politics, ability to combine personal goals with the team goals, harmonizing short-term and long-term goals, institutionalizing quality and review, managing people, practically applying the economics if self-funded and constantly deconstructing oneself as the agency of power. It is about finding the right balance, from being

² For more details, S.B Mujumdar, 2007: *Symbiosis: The Biography of an Idea*, Mac Millan, India

swept away by power and about keeping the scholarly commitment, rather the commitment to truth and ethics going.

Generally, all these tips for balancing also apply to the external roles. Among these roles, internationalization has been the buzz word. However, in identifying the international partnership or collaboration, the Dean requires to gather and study the best practice, to see the strengths and possibilities of all partners. Today, internationalization is adored for its wealth of revenue and cross fertilization of ideas. However, this requires careful consideration in terms of activities in the range of exchanges, program partnering, scholarships, and joint activities leading to a win-win situation for all engaged in the collaboration. The dean initiates, motivates, leads and also reflects at every step.

The second important external role is in the community service. The community service provides a benevolent role to the law school. It not only enriches the clinical side but also redefines the law school in identifying the need for law reform, in dispelling the elite character of the law and reaches the legal remedy to the needy whose legal needs are unmet due to socio-economic or political reasons. In a globalizing context, the community service provides mutual learning avenues when it is combined with the first aspect of international collaboration. Symbiosis Law School has successfully piloted this idea in its recent initiative with the City University of New York Law School, USA³. It has added to its social agenda in utilizing law as the window to community development and inspired local legal fraternity to learn from the CUNY experience.

The third aspect is strengthening ties with the alumni. The author has seen the solid contribution of alumni in other Symbiosis institutes and in Law Schools in China. Symbiosis has not tapped the alumni for fund, none the less, alumni have strengthened student placement, acted as mentors, participated in curriculum review and design, employability training and have promoted the law school outside.

The fourth avenue of external role is the Advisory committee of the law school, which has drawn members from all the tiers of stakeholders including parents and NGOs, besides the state, the community and students. One parent is the prominent sitting judge of the High Court, whose timely advice has gone into the curriculum redesigning and ethical emphasis in all courses. Another member is the director of Commonwealth NGO on Human Rights, whose inputs have opened new vistas for the foundation course and research agenda. Representatives from various law firms have indicated the requisite skill sets, have brought research projects and have enriched the training as mentors, have collaborated in moots and have added to the learning process in curriculum review and redesign.

Amidst these, the balancing act demands relentless efforts for survival, in the form of brand-building by strengthening corporate relations and public relations. Symbiosis Law School is enriched by the strategic approach of its specialists in these fields in sister institutes as the networking provides agenda-setting ideas and interdisciplinary guidance as and when required.

³ See www.google.com for media references and Shashikala Gурpur, 2008, *Envisioning facelift: Legal Education for Human development*, UGC Publication, India (forthcoming)

The relationship with the state and central governments has provided the opportunity for consultations for law reform and conscientising the bureaucrats.⁴

The Balancing Act

Standing in the new era when the management concepts require reinventing, it is important to develop holistic performance measures and share the work of setting direction by spotting, retaining and managing talents. In this context, the law Dean should lead the way to humanize the volatile world into a just world, by balancing the strategic leadership with operational leadership⁵. It is about balancing the internal pedagogical and academic rigor with external boundary-crossing in order to develop, understand, convey and spread the vision with the help of training and feedback. It is only the visionary element which sets the leadership apart from the status quo manager.

⁴ The author was invited to the consultation of the National Womens' Commission, Foreign Service Institute, Police training proposal for the Ministry of Home Affairs and International ADR group.

⁵ Gary Hamel, 2009, *Moon Shots for Management*, Harvard Business Review South Asia, Feb., pp.79-86