Who would be a Dean?

Demonising Deans and the question of role modelling leadership in our Business Schools

On my precious research day – the first in a long time – I am searching JMS for articles about diversity and inclusion for a paper I am writing from a recent research project, and I come upon a scathing account of a Business School away day. In a short paragraph we learn who a key baddie of the tale is, the Business School Dean. Broadening my search to other management journals I find there is little empathy for the Business School Dean. They are portrayed variously as using corporate buzzwords, being out of touch from the academic community, and easily seduced by the power that apparently comes from the role. It seems the Dean is a character not only unloved by the management studies community, but also routinely criticised and despised. In the #METOO era, where colleagues would never dream of commenting on the dress of another, the appearance of the Dean - stereotypically presented as a sharp suited male – is a legitimate subject for comment. As portrayed in our academic journals, they are not the kind of characters that any one of us would aspire to be.

I go back to my paper, and am struck by how the research participants we interviewed for the diversity research project talk about the need for powerful role models and the avoidance of stereotypes. I reflect on what aspirational role models there are for me, a Business School Dean of six years. I find it hard to think of any, certainly not those portrayed in our academic journals. So why would anyone want to be a Dean?

The aim of this essay is to argue that we, as an academic community, need a serious conversation about how we stereotype the Business School Dean. I also suggest a call for action for change in the way all of us – including we Deans ourselves – talk about the role. My argument is that the negative stereotypes of Deans as promulgated in our journals and elsewhere prevent us from having positive Dean role models that others may aspire to. This is important because we need good people to take on Dean roles in our Business Schools. As a community we have critiqued at length the impact of the neo-liberal Business School on our working lives, our research, and our feelings of alienation. There is much commentary about what Deans may be doing wrong, but very little about what they need to do to deliver the kind of leadership we need.

To be clear I am not here to defend Deans. As a practising Dean I know we have our faults. We are – in some Business Schools – in positions of considerable power, we are usually paid higher than most people and you could say we have a relatively nice life cushioned away from the realities of the chalkface or the Zoom classroom. To be upfront here, I love my job. I enjoy being a Dean. And that is partly what has inspired me to write this essay; the dissonance between how much I like the job and how it is portrayed more generally in our community.

Where do Deans come from?

Deans come from many different backgrounds. My hunch is that no-one decides from an early age that they want to be a Business School Dean. It was never my aspiration as a little girl. So, what is the motivation and how does it happen? Speaking for myself, in the UK where I have pursued my career, the majority of Business School Deans tend to be academics who have progressed through the ranks of academic career, whilst at the same time taking on leadership roles, such as Head of Department, Associate Dean or Deputy Dean. I went down that path before I got my first Dean job. I felt I was

good at leadership. I liked making things happen and trying to help create a culture in which my colleagues could thrive. What has surprised me as I have progressed in these roles, is just how negative trusted colleagues can be about the decision to take on such a leadership role. I was warned by close academic colleagues that I would never do any research again, would never have any friends, and perhaps my favourite piece of advice: "If you want to be a Dean you need to stop going to the kind of conferences that you currently go to and start going to conferences full of people that you really don't like". He meant Deans conferences, as in conferences filled with people like me. At no point did anyone say that it was important that we had good people doing Dean type roles. It was always portrayed as a miserable career option, with little positive commentary on the role from my peers. The message was clear. If you could do successful research and teaching, then why would you want to be a Dean. Beyond the scepticism I encountered, there was also little advice or constructive suggestions regarding what to do and how to lead as a Dean. I remember making an effort to go on any kind of leadership programme I could access. But discussions about Business School leadership took place within the close confines of those programmes, rather than within my own academic community.

Replicating the problem

An additional challenge is that sometimes those who are part of our Dean community – both current and past Deans - also talk negatively about the role, therein replicating the problem. It is easy for us to confirm the view colleagues tend to have that we Deans are extremely busy, and the job is very pressured. This form of impression management may promote the view of the Dean as hero battling against their heavy workloads to get things done, but may also give others the idea that the job is not only impossible to do, but also unattractive. It is true that our Dean days are full of busy activities and the life involves going from meeting to meeting. But it also involves working with talented and interesting people; having the chance to travel internationally; and sometimes having the opportunity to feel that you have done something that makes a difference. For me, those aspects far outweigh the negative ones previously discussed. Having spent an academic career writing about the joys of qualitative research I am continuously reminded of the importance of talk. The Dean role will never appear attractive whilst we continuously talk about it in a negative way. We know from the work of our discourse analyst colleagues that discourses can work to include or exclude (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2018). Therefore, how we talk about the role is important. I try to make sure that I always talk about the positive aspects of my role; I tell people that running the Business School is the best job in the University; I work with great people and our students do interesting things. In addition, I try not to talk about it in a way that may exclude others from aspiring to it. I rarely suggest that the job needs long hours or a presenteeism approach. And I never imply that by virtue of my role I have a busier or harder time than anyone else in my School. I also never suggest that being a Dean requires you to work 24 hours a day or be a workaholic. Talking like that will put others off. And perhaps more importantly, in my experience, that is not a requirement.

My point here is that I feel a responsibility to promote the role in a positive way, otherwise no-one would ever want to do it. And we need good colleagues to be interested in taking on leadership roles in our Business Schools. This may especially be the case in the UK where we have a high turnover of Deans. Last year more than a third of Schools changed their Dean, and increasingly there is a limited pool of candidates for these roles. The outcome is that many Schools are on the look out for a good Dean. Rather than replicating the problem, we as a management studies community – including we Deans – need to promote positive aspects of the role, both to encourage others to want to do it and to encourage conversations about the type of leadership we want and need. We should talk about it

as an important leadership role, and treat it as seriously as we treat leadership in our educational delivery of the topic.

What should we do?

So far, I have argued that the negative stereotypes of Deans, as promulgated in our journals, amongst colleagues, and sometimes reinforced by we Deans ourselves, do two things. One is they prevent us from having positive role models of Deans which may inspire others to take on the role, and second, they prevent a serious discussion about what good Business School leadership looks like. So how do we address this? Some suggestions are presented below, with the aim of starting a discussion and a call to action.

First, we need to be explicit about what we want our Deans to do. Being clear on the kind of leadership we want enables us to be explicit about how we want Deans to behave. We talk at length about what we don't like, but rarely talk about what we do want them to do. An exception perhaps, is the recent point – counterpoint section in JMS that focused upon responsible research in business and management. Here Tsui and McKiernan (2022) gave us a clear statement on what Deans should be doing to support research on societally significant problems. It is useful for Business School colleagues to highlight different avenues for Deans to respond to the challenges that we face Not only does it recognise the Dean's agency, it also firmly positions the Dean as part of our management studies community. When we write our articles de-crying the current state of our discipline, our Business Schools or academia more generally, we need to say what we want the Dean to do about it, and why.

Aguinnis, Archibald and Rice (2002: 1630) question amongst other things: "How many Business School deans and department chairs are using our latest management and leadership research to effectively manage and lead their workgroups?" This is a good question. How do we practice what we teach? Coming from an OB background, I have found some of our theoretical insights invaluable in my everyday practice. To take an example, experience has taught me that perhaps the most important thing I need to do in my job is to be politically astute; to understand University politics so I can influence upwards and downwards to enable positive outcomes for my colleagues. I have tried throughout my leadership roles to work hard on building and maintaining relationships with those at all different levels, with varying degrees of success and failure. I am reminded of a book that I used to use many years ago with my MBA students entitled 'Power, Politics and Organisational Change' by Buchanan and Badham, now in its third edition. The authors talked about power and politics in a non-pejorative way, as an everyday, legitimate part of organisational behaviour. My approach to my Dean role has been informed by that lens; I see embracing and engaging in organisational politics as necessary to get things done. Whereas traditionally organisational politics has been defined as self-serving behaviours, in line with Buchanan and Badham's analysis, I see behaving politically as crucial to promoting the interests of my School. On leaving an institution some time ago, the colleague giving a speech about me kindly suggested that I had got lots of things done because I was a *nice* person. However, I know that being perceived as *nice* had in practice required a lot of time and energy on my part to build relationships with key people, the type of invisible work crucial for successful leadership. I am reminded of the famous Dolly Parton quote: "It takes a lot of money to look this cheap". Or in my case, it takes a lot of effort to appear this nice. For me, that book gave me permission to embrace organisational politics but also re-frame it in a way where it fitted my style and I felt comfortable. So as Deans we can clearly learn from the knowledge created by our community and put it in to practice.

My next suggestion is that we as faculty colleagues should not always position the Dean as other. In relating my own experience earlier, the move to the position of Dean was see by others as me deciding to give up something precious. Indeed, many Deans also recognise this as Brown, Lewis and Oliver's (2021) study of the identity work of Deans suggests. The Deans in their study were seen to experience a sense of loss as they moved to their leadership role and away from their research careers. Rather than characterise leadership in this way, I think we as a management studies community should welcome leadership as a legitimate career route within the academy and celebrate those colleagues who choose that route as we would celebrate our excellent researchers and educators. They are part of the Business School fold, choosing to make their contribution in a different way. Too often do we belittle leadership in our Business Schools and label those jobs as 'administration'. I managed to successfully ban the phrase *administrative roles* in my previous institution, insisting instead that academics did *leadership roles*. This is not to deny the importance of administration, but rather this comes back to my earlier point about the significance of language.

Third, all of us in our management studies community should dare to celebrate and talk about good role models when we see them. A key element of this is inclusivity. For example, inevitably, our Dean stereotypes are gendered. In the accounts I mention at the start of this essay, the Dean was seen as male. Discussions of leadership cannot escape a consideration of gender and the outdated stereotype of the Dean as male impacts on those who do not fit. Like most women who rise to positions of leadership in our Universities I have experienced both overt and covert forms of discrimination. I've been overlooked for key roles; indeed, in one situation it was only when feminist colleagues created a fuss about a post not being advertised, that I was recruited to it when I applied during the open competition. I've also been underpaid in comparison to male colleagues at times during my career; and I've encountered the everyday sexism that impacts women in the workplace via processes such as thought appropriation and assumptions about my career aspirations given my motherhood. I know there are similarities between my experiences and those of women who attain leadership positions in most other environments, and also with those who may be 'different' for other reasons, be it ethnicity, age or other aspects of background. There are many reasons why we feel we may not fit. These experiences however, have been pivotal to how I behave as a Dean. Having the experience of being overlooked means I am keenly aware of the need to advertise all leadership opportunities. Knowing what it feels like to be underpaid in direct comparison to male colleagues means I am keen to address the gender pay gap. And experiences of everyday sexism mean I try hard to address those behaviours in my own practice. It is important that all of us both promote and celebrate not only those who for whatever reason are 'different'; but also anyone we perceive to be a good role model. Otherwise, we inevitably exclude.

Fourth, as colleagues, we should think of sometimes offering support to the Dean. The Dean operates in the same environment as the rest of us. This is not to deny their authority and responsibility, but rather to remind us that leadership is context bound. For example, one of the many complaints we hear about our Deans is their use of journal lists. I can confidently say from my own experience that there are many UK Deans who do not use these lists. They know that the grading of a journal is not a reliable predictor of excellent research and instead set up systems for the alternative reviewing of work. But such a system needs extensive support from colleagues. Too often Deans are told – as I have been myself – "I don't have time to read and review that work, I am too busy, do I get any hours for it?" In highlighting this I am not detracting from the challenges of workload in our Business Schools. I know that many colleagues feel, and indeed are, overloaded. But if there is no-one available to review the work of others, then the options for the Dean are relatively limited. Using a list will be the easy option. We as a community all need to take responsibility to

support the Dean who is taking a stance. I need the support of my colleagues to be able to do things differently.

Conclusions

Before concluding, it is important to caveat that unsurprisingly, my account is clearly influenced by my own experience of the role. That of other Deans may be somewhat different. It is also contextually focused, as someone who has worked in large UK research-intensive Schools. Conceptualisations of leadership and academia are diverse in different parts of the world. Furthermore, the reader may suspect that this essay is just a response to what Brown et al. (2021: 824) highlight when they assert "Deans have a continuing need to author identities both to impression manage and to cope with existential concerns".

As I noted at the start of this essay, we do need to have a serious conversation about how we, as an academic community, want to be led. We have talked a lot about the institutional pressures on Business Schools in this commercialised, neo-liberal and now post-pandemic environment. Just reading the pages of JMS and other arenas where business and management scholars commentate, we know what we are frustrated about. We are fed up with Deans making promotions decisions based on journal rankings; worried about the lack of attention they pay to scholarly activity; and concerned about the unequal distribution of rewards in our Business Schools. We need the right type of leadership to address this. And we need to encourage others to want to be that kind of leader. What does the alternative to our sharp-suited away day Dean look like? And if we don't progress in the way I suggest, why would anyone want to be a Dean?

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Martyna Sliwa, Joanne Duberley and the two JMS Says Editors: Trish Reay and Thomas Roulet, for their helpful comments on previous versions of this essay.