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## Deans and Stories

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## DEANS AND STORIES

*William Michael Treanor\**

PROFESSOR Howard Gardner's superb book *Leading Minds* is a study of leadership that, while prominent in the discipline of education, has received relatively little attention in the legal literature. A LEXIS search that I ran while writing this essay revealed only a handful of citations in the nine years since the book appeared. *Leading Minds* thoughtfully argues that effective story-telling is critical to effective leadership. In this essay, I want to explore in a very preliminary way the relationship between Gardner's thesis and what deans do or should do in order to lead their law schools and, more broadly, the different constituencies they represent.

*Leading Minds* is, in large part, a series of mini-biographies of leaders of various types: scholars (Margaret Mead and Robert Oppenheimer, at the beginning of their careers); organizational leaders (Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., of General Motors; Secretary of State and Chief of Staff of the United States Army George C. Marshall; Pope John XXIII); and those whom Gardner classifies as leaders of constituencies wider than a particular organization, a category that capaciously encompasses Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Thatcher, Jean Monnet, and Mahatma Gandhi. And, in his group of 11 leaders, Gardner includes an academic leader—Robert Maynard Hutchins, who was dean of Yale Law School and then president of the University of Chicago. Gardner posits that all leaders share a common trait: the ability to construct and convey a powerful narrative. In setting forth the basic thesis of his book, Gardner writes, “[A] key—perhaps *the* key—to [successful] leadership ... is the effective communication of a story.”<sup>1</sup>

Gardner is concerned with a particular definition of leadership. Leaders are “persons who, by word, and/or personal example, markedly influence the behaviors, thoughts, and/or feelings of a significant number of their fellow human beings.”<sup>2</sup> Leadership, defined in this way, is different from management. In an insightful contribution to this series on deans and leadership, Tom Sullivan distinguished between leadership and management, and wrote that “management requires organizing, planning, motivating, economizing, and careful attention to detail. A manager must function at the micro level, while the leader generally should reserve the majority of his or her time to the macro level of planning.”<sup>3</sup> To be effective, deans must be both leaders and managers. In focusing here on leadership as defined by Gardner, I do not mean to de-emphasize the value of management. (Indeed, every day since I have been dean, I have been critically aware of how vital good management is to the law school's operation.) But Gardner's approach is worth

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1. HOWARD GARDNER, *LEADING MINDS: AN ANATOMY OF LEADERSHIP* 62 (1995) (in collaboration with Emma Laskin).

2. *Id.* at 8-9 (emphasis omitted).

3. E. Thomas Sullivan, *Decanal Leadership: Managing Relationships*, 31 U. TOL. L. REV. 749, 749 (2000).

highlighting because it clarifies a critical role of deans. The dean as leader defines the law school—constructs an account of what the law school is about and where it is going—and, in so doing, if successful, the dean inspires, educates, and ultimately influences the law school's constituencies in a way that shapes the law school's future.

The success of the story does not turn simply on the leader's abstract skill in communicating a story. It turns, as well, on how the audience reacts to the story and on the leader's ability to institutionalize that story. Hutchins's history as academic leader, in Gardner's account, powerfully illustrates this point. As law school dean, he communicated very effectively. He conceptualized Yale Law School as a progressive institution, one that emphasized the social sciences and pragmatic problem solving. He broke with traditional focus on the case method and intellectual separation from other schools in the university and aligned himself with one wing of the faculty. And, although his tenure was brief, he proved effective in re-casting the school: "[A]t the Yale Law School under Hutchins's leadership there was a clear sense of excitement, a feeling that things were happening, a conviction that the school was *the* place to be."<sup>4</sup> Hutchins's casting of Yale as a legal realist school proved to be a very effective story.

In contrast, his legacy at Chicago was decidedly mixed. The conservative-traditionalist account he offered of the University of Chicago was dramatically different than the one he had offered of Yale. At Chicago, Hutchins championed a vision of the university "grounded in the conviction that education should focus sharply on the life of the mind; that the reading and discussion of great books is the preferred route; and that this purposefully general education would produce an educated citizenry that ... could be entrusted with the public good."<sup>5</sup> He won a wide popular audience for his views and raised a substantial amount of money for the school, but his views deeply divided the university. Many faculty members were initially committed to a very different account of the University of Chicago—one that embraced the educational philosophy of John Dewey, which was self-consciously pluralist and progressive—and they never embraced Hutchins's story.

In the conclusion to his discussion of Hutchins, Gardner observes that academic leaders "have two important, but not necessarily confluent, assignments: first, creating a story that made sense to the variety of constituents, ranging from crusty trustees to impressionable prospective students; second, providing enough direction and support to those under their charge so that the institution could operate effectively on a daily and yearly basis."<sup>6</sup> Hutchins partially succeeded and partially failed in the first assignment: he had many dedicated supporters, but his vision was always divisive; it never became firmly established as the dominant account. He failed in the second assignment. Focused on giving prominence to his own persona and views, rather than on institution building, he never "creat[ed] the institution[] that could carry on his mission and do so enthusiastically."<sup>7</sup>

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4. GARDNER, *supra* note 1, at 115.

5. *Id.* at 120.

6. *Id.* at 129.

7. *Id.*

Gardner's book, and his discussion of Hutchins, suggests that law school deans should have two goals in offering a story about their law school. First, they should provide an account that has broad appeal across the law school's constituencies and that reflects a vision of the law school that the dean finds substantively appealing. All law school deans are well aware of the many constituencies to which they must respond: faculty, students, university administration, alumni. As Gardner notes in his discussion of Hutchins, the story must "ma[ke] sense to the variety of constituents." Making sense to the constituencies is critical to effectiveness because the story helps the audience work through its sense of the institution and its future. Gardner writes: "[T]he most fundamental stories fashioned by leaders concern issues of personal and group identity; those leaders who presume to bring about major alterations across a significant population must in some way help their audience members think through who they are."<sup>8</sup> Second, they must find a way to institutionalize the story, to create the preconditions for its preservation after the dean is no longer in her position of leadership. This second concern is, in part, tied in with the effectiveness of the story. Hutchins's vision of the University of Chicago had only limited influence after he resigned in part because it never captured the approval of a large segment of the faculty. But that lack of approval was not simply a product of the limited appeal of the story, but a result of who Hutchins was. Gardner reports that Hutchins sought simply to impose his vision, rather than engaging in ongoing dialogue with his constituencies and, in particular, with his faculty. That dialogue might well have led to a modification of the story, but it might also have led to a greater level of long-term success of the story's core.

I would like to focus, however, not on the second point (the importance of institutionalizing the story), but on the first: the importance of the dean's story. I think that all deans think through and talk about what is unique, or at least distinctive, about their schools. Hutchins, for example, highlighted Yale's ties to the social sciences and its problem-solving approach. I can think of other schools that highlight the fact that the school trains the leaders of a region (or the nation), its commitment to service, its strength in a discipline, its religious identity, its international orientation, its unique commitment to excellence, its commitment to opening the doors of legal education to those who otherwise never would have had the chance, and the list, obviously, goes on. Fordham is currently beginning to frame a strategic plan; and the notion of forward-looking focus on some subset of the limitless range of possibilities for the school—is at the heart of strategic planning. In a host of ways, we as deans are called to think about what our school's mission for the future is.

Gardner's book, however, suggests that leading an educational institution requires more than charting a path of growth. It involves explaining to the various constituencies how that path is a natural step—and the right next step—for the community, how it is consistent with the community's identity. In using the word "story," Gardner is not indicating that the account is fictional, but that it has a temporal dimension. He writes: "I deliberately use the terms *story* and *narrative* rather than *message* or *theme*. In speaking of stories, I want to call attention to the fact that leaders present a *dynamic* perspective to their followers: not just a headline

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8. *Id.* at 62.

or a snapshot, but a drama that unfolds over time, in which they—leaders and followers—are the principal characters or heroes. Together, they have embarked on a journey in pursuit of certain goals, and along the way and into the future, they can expect to encounter certain obstacles or resistances that must be overcome.<sup>9</sup> To be effective, the story has to reflect the community's sense of itself. "Effectiveness here involves fit—the story needs to make sense to audience members at this particular historical moment, in terms of where they have been and where they would like to go."<sup>10</sup>

At some level, the story is necessarily organic, growing out "of where [community members] have been." But that does not mean that it cannot involve a call for change, even great change. As previously noted, Gardner writes, "[T]hose leaders who presume to bring about major alterations across a significant population must in some way help their audience members think through who they are."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the embrace of legal realism at Yale during Hutchins's tenure can be understood as reflecting the fact that members of the community thought their fundamental commitment was to academic excellence, rather than to a specific set of traditional approaches to legal education that previously had been ascendant at the school. Change thus accorded with the community's basic value. Alternately, other academic leaders call for radical change as necessary to return to a previous level of excellence (or some other value) that the school has wandered from. So, organic storytelling and fundamental change are not inconsistent.

What is necessary is that the story be linked to the community and its members. When I first became dean, I was talking to one of our graduates about legal education and what was important to him. He said, "I don't care about where legal education is going. What I want to know is: what is right for *my* law school?" And I think that puts it very well. The dean's primary constituencies are people who have at some previous point opted into the law school community from among a range of different options. They are alumni and students who came to the school, rather than going to other schools or pursuing a non-legal career. They are faculty who came to the school rather than going to another school or pursuing a career in practice or some other type of activity. All have been shaped by the experience at the law school. To gain support, the dean must explain how her plans accord with the experiences and commitments that the community members treasure.

Now, there are some people who deans can appeal to who are outside the community. Prospective students do not define themselves as members of the community and so are unlikely to be interested in an account that links past and present. Some prospective donors without previous ties to the law school may give because they like the school's mission, and they do not care about where the school has been. There are some members of the community who are so dissatisfied with their experience that they do not want continuities with the past. But these are the exceptions. The dean's critical constituencies care about the school because each thinks of it as "my" school, and they will want to know that charted change, rather

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9. *Id.* at 14.

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.* at 62.

than making the school alien to them, will bring it into greater alignment with what they value most about it.

It may be that Gardner's model has particular power for me because I am trained as an historian as well as a lawyer, and I naturally invoke history when I talk about things. So, the idea of communicating by tracing a line between past, present, and future has an innate appeal for me. But I think his conception of leadership is one that should appeal to all deans. Each of us has chosen our law school. We were drawn to our schools because of the strong fit between what we value and the school. Gardner's model of leadership calls on us to talk to our various constituencies in a way that brings our thinking about that fit to the fore. Like our faculty, students, and alumni, each of us has picked our law school as "my" school. As we talk about our school's future, the task before us is to explain how that plan is the right plan for a school that all the members of the community have chosen and value.