

# Taking the reins as a business school dean





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# The hardest thing

**W**HEN Hildy Teegen took the reins as the dean of the Darla Moore School of Business at University of South Carolina, it became the most rewarding position she had ever undertaken—an extraordinary privilege to work on initiatives of greater scale, scope, and impact. It was also the hardest thing she had ever done.

Business school deans have an expansive and complex role in the fabric of the universities and communities served by their programs. Yet many newly minted deans discover that the experiences they acquire while climbing the ranks of academia or industry do not adequately prepare them for their new responsibilities. While some deans served in department chair roles where they managed a small group of faculty peers, becoming a dean requires them to oversee a broader range of issues and operations. Rather than primarily managing individual projects, they assume responsibility for a school's research portfolio. Rather than managing relationships with a small group of faculty peers, they assume responsibility for cultivating relationships with internal staff and external stakeholders, including donors, alumni, the media, and the business community. In addition, deans assume responsibility for their school's finances and their contribution to the broader university, and they must advocate the interests of their business school among a university's senior leadership, donors, and government

stakeholders to obtain the requisite resources to sustain programs or grow new ones. Similarly, industry experience by itself may not adequately prepare an executive-turned-dean to effectively recruit faculty or navigate change in an academic culture.

Incoming business school deans face a profoundly challenging environment. A worldwide economic downturn resulted in declining demand for MBA programs at many schools. Massive online open courses (MOOCs) undermine traditional models of education, and recruiters and employers are demanding a higher standard of talent from all schools. In addition, third-party rankings are significantly influencing schools' reputations, the number of applications they receive, and their revenues. All of these challenges require incoming deans to shape and execute thoughtful responses.

In 2012, Deloitte's University Relations Program interviewed 20 business school deans about their transition experiences and piloted a transition lab to help them frame critical priorities, evaluate their organizations, and develop a strategy to advance their agenda while remaining mindful of their myriad stakeholders. In an attempt to help business school deans effectively transition into their new roles, this paper synthesizes key findings from our interviews, our labs, and related experiences on executive transitions and business school strategy.

# The four faces of a business school dean

**W**HEN one prominent business school dean assumed his post, he encountered several disparate problems. First, his school had experienced a 50 percent decline in applications in the three years leading up to his appointment. When he became dean, his school's rankings were slipping, senior faculty members were finding greener pastures in other programs, alumni were unhappy, and the university had just announced a capital campaign. These problems illustrate the array of issues that can face an incoming dean. Furthermore, many deans assume their new positions without clarity about the roles they are taking on, and they lack experiences that are vital to their success.

Our extensive work with executives in transition suggests that business school deans, like many senior leadership positions in industry and government, play four distinct roles within their programs.

**Strategist:** Deans are responsible for positioning their schools for the future and ensuring that ample resources, including money, faculty, students, and physical assets, are in place to fulfill that future. Today, schools are challenged to produce global managers, adapt to the digitalization of education, and transform curricula to strike a balance between greater specialization and broader leadership skills. This leaves many programs scrambling to meet the shifting needs of the marketplaces for which they prepare their graduates. In addition, mounting competition

among programs places a strategic imperative on improving the value and relevance of the education they offer to students.

**Catalyst:** Adapting to changing economic, demographic, political, and business environments places new demands on business schools and their leadership. Deans need to do more than merely dream up a strategy. They need to be change managers who build consensus and credibility for their strategy and find a way to mobilize the academic community. This is far from easy, given tenured faculty and academic councils. Deans have to become masters of influence when driving a change agenda. In order to meet tight deadlines for strategic change in academic institutions, which are fundamentally averse to change, deans need to calibrate their agendas to avoid losing credibility or feasibility. Agendas lose credibility if implemented before internal stakeholders buy in to the ideas at hand. Agendas lose feasibility if they wait too long to get off the ground and cannot be completed or substantially advanced within the typical five-year timeframe of an initial dean contract.

**Steward:** Deans are also responsible for protecting their school's core assets, including its reputation, critical faculty, intellectual property, financial assets, student standards, and accreditation. In addition, deans are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their institutions are in compliance with the regulations that govern them. As stewards, business school

deans are a top line of defense that protects the assets that give programs a leg up in a crowded market. And when things go wrong, deans have to find solutions that maintain their school's reputation and assets.

**Operator:** This role encompasses all the operational activities that drive the efficient delivery of education to students. For example, deans are ultimately responsible for the recruitment of faculty, their assignment to and scheduling of classes, and their delivery of quality classes through multiple channels. They are also responsible for overseeing marketing efforts to prospective students as well as their recruitment to the school and their placement to valued jobs when they graduate. Deans also have to ensure that the school has the right mix

of tenured faculty and contract-based adjunct faculty to deliver high-quality, efficient, and cost-effective education. Finally, they often oversee the delivery of technology and other systems for instruction and operations.

Successfully delivering across these roles requires focus and support. As Dean Sally Blount, Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and a host of other interview subjects noted, deans cannot accomplish the various facets of their roles if they're acting alone. Provosts, presidents, and trustees seek deans who can adapt their schools to changing times. Deans must allocate most of their time to the strategist and catalyst roles, requiring them to develop an excellent cabinet of associate deans who execute operational and stewardship responsibilities on their behalf.

# Navigating the time, talent, and relationships triangle

**T**HE success of a dean's transition can hinge on how he or she effectively manages three key resources: time, talent, and relationships.

**Time:** The flood of issues that crosses a dean's desk places a premium on time, so deans need to quickly develop a clear sense of their priorities and strategic objectives as they take office. Descriptions of long hours, a dearth of strategies for fostering a wide range of internal and external relationships, and limited bandwidth were recurring themes among the deans we interviewed. Even as they sort through their responsibilities, they're already working against the clock. Fuqua School of Business dean Bill Boulding noted that you can't wait too long before you start to demonstrate progress within your institution. Even with a wealth of experience within Duke University's business school, his challenge, like other executives, was to whittle the list of 100 things that he knew were on fire down to a few priorities. He chose three key priorities: preserve a shared sense of identity and purpose within the school, create an operationally sound business model to build long-term financial health, and articulate a strategic direction to a broad array of key stakeholders.

Industry executives typically operate on a 180-day cycle. During this time, corporate executives generally have to establish themselves and their organizations and achieve some tangible results. Deans, on the other hand, operate on a very different timeframe, and depending on the organization they inherit, they may have to plan according to a

one- or two-year horizon to frame their specific change strategies. This is because an academic calendar is often set a year in advance, and it is difficult to change. The lengthy academic recruiting process can also make it difficult to quickly drive changes.

Timing is everything when it comes to successful dean transitions. Initiating a change agenda in an academic setting can be profoundly different from an industry setting, placing particular demands on a dean's roles as a strategist and catalyst. The five-year window before a dean's contract typically comes up for renewal forces them to hit the ground running in the first two years. Navigating the constraints of an academic calendar is critical in establishing an agenda and having the right talent to execute it. Tenured faculty stakeholders are under no real obligation to support a dean's change agenda; if a dean fails to achieve buy-in from tenured faculty members, they can simply drag their feet until the next dean comes along. Thus, deans need to quickly cultivate credibility and commitment to their strategies among their faculty.

**Talent:** The deans we interviewed were also quick to point out that they could never do their jobs alone. They stressed the importance of surrounding themselves with the right talent so their office could effectively manage each of the four faces of the dean role. Recruiting and appointing people are two of the most important things deans do. When one of the deans we interviewed took on the dean role, he decided to forgo a piece of advice from a senior

colleague: to ask for the resignations of all the legacy direct reports in favor of establishing a team of his own. While this is a standard practice among leaders in government and business, he felt that he knew the people on his leadership team and thought they were competent. After a year and a half, with more clarity, he wished he had moved more quickly to tailor his team.

The easiest way for deans to succeed across each of the four faces of their role is to focus on developing and implementing a change agenda and quickly surrounding themselves with a cabinet that can take responsibility for time-absorbing operational obligations. To this end, it's critical to hire staff that has the skills required to ensure employee satisfaction, operational excellence, fundraising, target-listing, scheduling, and a host of other operational obligations. Stefanie Lenway, dean of the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, stressed the importance of having a process for establishing a cabinet within 90 days of taking office. She established a committee of faculty members who helped her interview internal candidates, which gave her important insights that helped her select the best cabinet members. Establishing a great team can be an important early victory when taking the reins in an academic setting. Having a cabinet in place and operating smoothly during the first year can go a long way toward advancing a change agenda in the second year.

**Relationships:** New deans are frequently inundated by the volume of relationships they're expected to foster. From presidents to provosts to faculty and other deans, taking the reins of a business school can hinge on the ability to develop a physical presence on campus. Many of the deans we interviewed found it helpful to schedule meetings with their faculty during the first few months of their administrations. A dean that we interviewed scheduled meetings with each of the faculty members in his business school, which helped him establish

relationships and more fully understand the contributions and aspirations of the extant faculty of the school. Similarly, Christine Poon, dean at the Max M. Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University, identified a couple of key people to help her learn, listen, and navigate the school during the first few months. In addition, she took the time to establish personal relationships with as many people on campus as she could. She used these meetings to understand the culture of the institution, identify the things that people love about the university, and pinpoint opportunities for partnerships and collaborations.

Simultaneously, deans are expected to foster relationships with a wide range of off-campus stakeholders, including alumni, donors, the business community, and the media. Kindling these external relationships with donors and alumni is extremely important for business school deans. Alumni and MBA applicants learn about business schools from the media, so establishing a credible presence in the media is an important avenue for fostering positive relationships with these important stakeholders. One of the deans we interviewed had previously served as a senior associate dean at another university where he was internally focused, so he wasn't prepared for public speaking, media appearances, and civic functions. In hindsight, he underestimated how valuable these opportunities can be to deliver crisp, clear messages about his program and its future. Collectively, external stakeholders go a long way in dictating the financial and reputational well-being of a business school.

Deans must find a way to divide their time between internal and external stakeholders, especially during the first 180 days of their administrations. The decision between building internal and external relationships resides in the organizations they inherit. In some cases, deans assume leadership of schools that are difficult to navigate. These programs require deans to spend a larger percentage of their time kindling relationships and



establishing their presence on campus. In other cases, deans inherit business schools that are running smoothly, so they have the benefit of quickly establishing key relationships that help them learn the ropes on campus, thus freeing them to focus their attention on pursuing external resources and relationships. Given the scope and magnitude of their relationships, deans may need to rely on key staff and faculty to serve as ambassadors for their business

schools. For example, Dean Robert Dammon, Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University, had a goal of reconnecting with many external stakeholders as a critical first step in his tenure as dean. But given all the other responsibilities he had as a new dean, he felt very time-constrained in the first six months. In hindsight, he realized the importance of effectively delegating responsibilities to his senior associate deans and senior faculty.

# Seven ways to garner a good start

**1. Begin preparing before you take on the role.** As with all new roles, it is critical to prepare for the dean role ahead of time. It is helpful to understand the cultural norms of a school and its faculty during the interview process. Similarly, understanding the sources and uses of funding can be vital. For example, can you run a separate capital campaign for the business school? Do you understand how funds are allocated at the university level and the intricacies of cash flows from the business school to the university and vice versa? Often, a business school is a cash cow with revenue that supports other university initiatives. Incoming deans need to understand the expectations of a university's president and provost pertaining to revenue growth and contributions to the broader university. Then, they need to negotiate a structure that provides leeway to grow the business school. Similarly, many universities have centralized tenure processes and resources such as communications and PR. Will these structures constrain your ability as a dean? Negotiating and having resources committed to the needs of a school is sometimes best established before an incoming dean accepts the role. The ability to negotiate frequently decreases after accepting a position. Thus, dean candidates should undertake due diligence with a critical analysis of the current constraints and likely resources needed to achieve their change agendas.

**2. Establish your cabinet early on.** Change takes time in an academic institution.

During the early days of a transition, a dean's ability to establish an excellent cabinet that can handle the steward and operator aspects of the administration can be a big help when trying to establish a strategy and implement change. Choosing ambassadors of the school to interact with university committees, external stakeholders, and the community is also vital to expanding a dean's capacity to drive initiatives. Thus, the overall impact of a dean's first five-year run can hinge on the ability to make critical changes in leadership in the first year. Beyond recruiting leaders, it is critical to establish clear expectations and goals for leaders, feedback processes, and the delegation of authority and resources for them to get their jobs done.

**3. Listen.** Many of the deans we interviewed pointed out the importance of being a good listener. Especially for deans who are recruited to their roles from external positions, it's important to spend time listening to faculty who can shed light on a school's culture and opportunities to improve the education it delivers to its students. For example, one dean took the reins at a school at which he had never worked. Spending his first six months listening to people who knew the ropes proved helpful as he started to establish his change agenda for moving the school forward. People who have worked within a particular business school for a long time can help incoming deans identify which details are hiding devils, allowing them to nimbly navigate

a program's nuances. Jerry Strawser, dean of May Business School at Texas A&M, noted that actively soliciting feedback from faculty and staff and making sure they know you're listening can go a long way toward garnering buy-in from the internal stakeholders. To this end, it's important to spend time listening to as many stakeholders as possible.

- 4. Be visible and vocal.** First impressions marred by absence can be difficult to overcome. New deans need to carefully allocate ample time to establish a physical presence, communicate, and foster relationships with important stakeholders on campus, including the president, provost, board, senior faculty, and the finance committee. Beyond personal relationships, it is important to be more broadly visible in communicating priorities and change agendas to a whole school and its broader community. Competent PR and marketing resources can be helpful when framing and sustaining an integrated and coherent communications strategy during a dean's tenure. Communication is vital to influencing individuals and mobilizing the entire organization to adhere to a new agenda.
- 5. Don't wait to connect personally with critical alumni and donors.** The importance of fostering relationships with the external stakeholders vital to a school's funding and its standing in the business community cannot be underestimated. In many cases, this requires a delicate division of a dean's time between on-campus stakeholders and their external counterparts. Face time is important for alumni and donors, but it isn't the only way to connect. Rich Lyons, the dean of the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley, recalled that he perhaps over-delegated responsibility for maintaining relationships with the program's top donors to other people. He suggests that writing a personal letter to your school's top donors

at the outset can go a long way in fostering these important relationships.

- 6. Manage the constraints of the academic calendar.** Timing can be a critical factor in a dean's attempt to successfully reposition a program. The academic calendar and the need to structure schedules or communicate program changes to existing and prospective students nearly a year in advance imposes critical constraints on the timing of change initiatives. Missing a critical window can delay programmatic changes for an entire year. It is best to establish a strong leadership team and a consensus on a school's strategic plan within the first year of an administration. Then begin implementing new programs during the second year, and scale initiatives during the third year.
- 7. Frame your playbook with clear goals.** Our labs suggest that schools often do not have an up-to-date strategy to adapt to the current business environment. A critical first-year initiative can be to frame a strategy and select specific levers for your playbook as a dean (see sidebar, "Framing a leadership playbook"). Often, strategy documents by committee are more visionary than practical. As a dean, you will have to choose the levers that help you realize your strategy and translate them into practical and useful actions. These levers must be based on a school's available resources and a realistic assessment of its capacity to generate new assets. Building support for a few key tangible priorities can be essential to focusing your time as a dean and setting expectations with your key stakeholders. We generally find that executives and deans are best served by having three to five key priorities with tangible milestones. For example, if you are focused on recruiting star faculty and increasing the number of endowed chairs, a goal might be to establish one new endowed chair and recruit a star faculty member each year.

## Framing a leadership playbook

Incoming deans inherit a variety of legacy operational issues, and it is easy to get distracted by the issues of the moment. We expect most deans will have to undertake strategist and catalyst roles to adapt their business schools to changing markets. Often, schools may not have established a strategic plan, and one way of establishing broad consensus on how to move forward is to frame a plan in collaboration with key faculty. Such a plan would likely give consideration to some of the areas outlined below to bolster a school's reputation and position it for the future. Both the demand for a particular business school and its ability to earn revenues hinge on reputational rankings.

The following tactics can help schools better serve their stakeholders and improve their reputations:

- 1. Attend to placement.** Some reputational rankings rely on recruiter surveys. Ultimately, students come to a business school to advance their careers. By improving placement processes and attracting key recruiters to campus, deans can advance the desirability of a school to students and recruiters. This sometimes requires recruiting a new placement director with good corporate recruiter relations and the active involvement of the dean in establishing critical corporate relations to support recruitment.
- 2. Upgrade student admissions.** The quality of students available to recruiters is only as good as the students admitted to a program. Business schools can improve admissions by raising average GMAT scores and reducing variance below the mean. To attract high-quality students, some schools offer better financial aid and scholarship packages tied to better GMAT performance. Better students attract recruiters from more highly regarded employers. Sometimes, having the same person oversee student admissions and placement creates accountability for ensuring that programs recruit the best students and place graduates in the best jobs.
- 3. Enhance facilities and operating environments.** Student satisfaction is another key driver of reputational rankings. The building facilities, technology, classroom environments, course registration and selection, and numerous other operating processes can impact satisfaction independently of teaching and placement. Attention to operational excellence across the various dimensions of a student's interaction with a school can enhance satisfaction ratings. Student focus groups may be very helpful in uncovering sources of frustration and dissatisfaction. For example, a university in an urban setting found its part-time students were constantly frustrated by the lack of available parking, which led to delays in arriving to classes or higher out-of-pocket expenses. The school improved satisfaction among its students by finding a way to address this issue.
- 4. Recruit stars and renew faculty.** Research publications are vital to accreditation and rankings. Recruiting star faculty (such as Nobel laureates or Nobels-in-waiting) can enhance the prestige of a school and attract other star faculty. Stars do not just have to be academic. Corporate or policy stars that affiliate with a school can also enhance prestige. Today, as many professors retire and the pipeline of PhDs diminishes in some fields, attracting the next generation of top-notch faculty can be a key challenge. Career development chairs offered to promising faculty with a fixed term or reduced teaching loads may be especially useful when recruiting promising candidates.
- 5. Secure endowments and university funding.** Fundraising to increase the number of endowed chairs or to endow facilities or programs can provide resources that increase the prestige of a school. Similarly, it is important for deans to get the fullest level of funding available from their university. Attracting faculty becomes easier if a school can offer more money for positions. Similarly, endowments can provide funding to attract better students or improve facilities.

6. **Establish new programs.** As markets for MBA education change, some schools are introducing more specialized programs to advance their students' careers. These may include complementary Master of Science programs in areas such as information systems or finance. Many schools are also introducing online programs and new variations on part-time and executive programs. Deans need to make sure their schools offer the right portfolio of products.
7. **Update curricula.** In addition to establishing new programs, deans need to work to update existing course curricula and delivery methods. Updating curricula by adding experiential processes (corporate visits or corporate consulting projects) and simulations, among other innovations, can enrich education and enhance satisfaction. Today, technology enables opportunities to transform a course's delivery as well as its content.
8. **Globalize.** Demand for global managers is leading many schools to increase the diversity of their student bodies and update their programs by incorporating visits to global companies and opportunities to study abroad with partner schools.
9. **Review brand and use public relations and communications to enhance reputation.** The outset of a dean's tenure can be a good time to review a school's inherited "brand" and identify opportunities to make improvements to its reputation. Focus groups with prospective students, alumni, and other stakeholders can be a useful way to understand how a school is currently perceived. Framing key messages and communications to reframe a brand and using public relations and media can expand awareness of a school and its progress against new goals among recruiters, students, alumni, and the community. Today, social media and multimedia provide new ways of communicating to stakeholders. Having coherent and effective communications strategies across media can also play an important role in enhancing a program's reputation. While communications and media are important to branding, credibility is won and lost among stakeholders based on the consistency with which a school lives up to the brand it is trying to cultivate.
10. **Strengthen relationships with alumni.** Alumni are the ambassadors of a school to the marketplace. Successful alumni advance the reputations of the schools that educated them. Today, alumni face lifelong learning needs and increasingly unconventional careers, from full-time employment to freelancing and consulting. Schools must consider opportunities and obligations to their alumni beyond the transaction of a degree, including curricula for lifelong learning.
11. **Foster community involvement.** Some schools have tremendous locational advantages or disadvantages. Community involvement can elevate a school's position within a community to facilitate better recruitment, joint programs, and new sources of revenues.
12. **Shift the mindset.** Improving operations, resources, and programs can go a long way in bolstering a school's performance, but deans can also play an important role in fundamentally shifting a school's mindset. Especially for the top 30 schools that remain outside the tell-tale top 10, there may be a need to change beliefs about a school and its ranking. As catalysts, deans in all levels of schools may have to drive culture change to renew their schools by modeling behaviors and creating narratives that evolve the mindsets of faculty, students, staff, and alumni alongside their programs.

The levers that a dean chooses to focus on in the first year depend on the particular needs of a school. Beyond major capital campaigns for resources, each of the above levers deserves consideration when framing a playbook. The challenge for new deans is to select a few levers they will choose to own and define a playbook of practical actions that advance a school in that area.

# A privilege and opportunity

**T**HE dean role is a unique privilege and opportunity to shape not only a school but a generation of future leaders. For many business schools, the status quo is incompatible with the realities of the emerging business landscape. Deans will have to work as strategists and catalysts with their faculty members to adapt business schools to the digitization of education and work life, new demands from recruiters for global managers, specialization for specific competencies and industries, and the needs for lifelong learning and new career models with extensive freelance work outside of a traditional corporate structure. The challenge for business schools is to build curricula and supportive programs that account for current and future business landscapes.

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Dr. Ajit Kambil is the Global Director of Research and Transitions for Deloitte's CFO program. As the creator of Deloitte's Transition Labs, he is a leading adviser to global CFOs and other CxOs (CIOs, CHROs, and deans) on how to successfully transition into new leadership roles. In the lab, senior executives frame their priorities, rethink organization design and relationships, and develop a practical 180-day work plan toward their priorities. Previously, Kambil led Deloitte's global think tank, and before that, he led key research initiatives at Accenture's Institute of Strategic Change. In the 1990s, as a member of the faculty at NYU's Stern School of Business, Kambil led the NSF-sponsored "EDGAR on the Internet" project that established Internet dissemination of corporate disclosures; he also pioneered eCommerce curricula at the MBA and executive MBA levels. He served as a distinguished scholar in residence at Babson College at the invitation of the provost in 2002, and previously served on the dean's advisory council at the Stevens Institute of Technology. In these roles, Kambil has contributed to the evolution of business schools and framed critical playbooks to effectively execute the dean role.

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