Characteristics of the Ideal ‘Executive Assistant to the Dean’

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Human Resources

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The work of the executive assistant to the dean is an extension of the work of the dean in service to the students, faculty, and institution. The executive assistant controls access to the dean, manages resources, and coordinates cyclical processes and routine projects under the dean’s responsibility. Deans need support to maximize their impact, and the right executive assistant is key. This article seeks to assist deans.

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(VPs, provosts, etc.) in their roles as staff supervisors: articulating job descriptions, assessing applicants, communicating expectations, and conducting performance reviews, all contributing to a culture of effectiveness.

The qualifications of the executive assistant vary based on the dean’s context and needs. High-level administrative skills are required, including clerical skills, technological savviness, systems mastery, and organizational abilities. Deans also need to consider ways they rely upon their executive assistants to optimize time and support their own overall effectiveness. Therefore, the following nonexhaustive list begins to explore the characteristics, orientations, roles, and modalities for the dean’s executive assistant. (To reduce cumbersome pronouns, the dean is designated “she” and the executive assistant is “he.”)

The ideal executive assistant to the dean possesses these characteristics:

1. He understands the high art of calendaring and his role as gatekeeper. He manages the dean’s routine and emergent deadlines and politely manages others’ access to her. He knows where she needs to be, what she needs to do, how much time she needs to recover from certain meetings, and when best to keep work moving. He knows how to adapt schedules and has the savvy to recognize and prioritize high-leverage activities. The ideal executive assistant subtly protects the dean from herself (e.g., from overcommitting), and seeks in all ways to ensure the dean can manifest her most effective leadership.

2. He quietly anticipates the needs of the dean. During the course of a day and throughout the cycles of the academic year, the executive assistant knows what, when, and how she needs something without her asking for it. In many ways, the ideal executive assistant knows the dean better than she knows herself; he knows her strengths and vulnerabilities, understands her work style, recognizes the circumstances under which she is most successful, and knows how she responds to different situations. He works behind the scenes to organize her professional life accordingly, learning and adapting over time to nourish the dean’s effectiveness.

3. He manifests absolute confidentiality and discretion. He comprehends the high stakes...
and sensitive nature of the dean's responsibilities. Inevitably, the executive assistant knows and has access to information of all sorts and remains a paragon of discretion. The ideal executive assistant makes the dean aware of information she may need in anticipation of a sensitive professional meeting or management of a personnel matter, ensuring that she never goes into a meeting uninformed. He is unquestionably discreet and trustworthy, able to serve as a confidant if she needs to think out loud.

4. **He interfaces effectively with coworkers.** He is a friendly colleague and, when necessary, the authoritative voice of the dean. He knows when to lead and how to be part of the team. The ideal executive assistant can gracefully reframe issues that disgruntle staff, while bringing legitimate concerns to the dean’s attention. He sets the tone for the dean’s office, reflects her sensibilities, and is a role model across campus for administrative effectiveness. He cultivates cross-institutional relationships that serve the dean’s interests.

5. **He has deep respect for the academic enterprise.** He has a genuine passion for the educational mission of the university and a deep respect for its faculty and students. He maintains cursory knowledge of all university systems and intimate familiarity with the portfolios of others on the dean’s team. While he may express sympathy with a disgruntled faculty member, student, or parent, the ideal executive assistant never publicly or privately criticizes students, faculty, or staff. Similarly, he never criticizes university leaders.

6. **He upholds the dean’s credibility.** He never criticizes the dean and proactively finds ways to praise her genuinely and honestly. In addition, he doesn’t tolerate others’ criticism of the dean and works to maintain a positive impression of her. Ensuring her credibility is never undermined, he makes himself personally accountable (publicly, if necessary) when the dean errs, for example, regarding scheduling snafus, missed deadlines, or other less-than-optimal outcomes. At the same time, the ideal executive assistant knows when and where to push back or express disagreement and helps the dean identify ways to repair damaged credibility when missteps and calamities occur.

7. **He carefully monitors the dean’s time away from the office.** He knows the cycles of work for the dean, her supervisor, faculty, and students. When the dean is away, he monitors the demands made on the office to ensure risks are minimized. Similarly, he protects the dean’s personal time. The ideal executive assistant knows when to encourage work-life balance and wellness activities, protects the sanctity of vacation time, and provides necessary updates. He maintains cordial relationships with the dean’s partner, children, family, and friends, as appropriate.

8. **He exhibits decorum and savoir faire.** He is gracious and diplomatic in all interactions, functioning as the dean’s emissary and office host, always aware of his symbolic representation of the dean, the school, college, and university. The ideal executive assistant develops and maintains a sophisticated awareness of etiquette and protocol for situations involving diverse internal and external constituencies, including food preferences and gift-giving conventions. His polish in arranging events and interacting with guests burnishes the dean’s credibility and effectiveness.

9. **He facilitates transitions.** These days, it is not unusual for a dean to serve as few as 3-6 years because of many trends and challenges in higher education. Thus, it is incumbent upon the executive assistant to manage the transition between deans. The specific demands may be different for internal versus external hires, but the quality of this transition is key to a successful start for a new dean, while remaining respectful to the former dean. The ideal executive assistant understands this role and is prepared to work with an interim dean and “break in” a new dean.

10. **He knows when to move on.** The chemistry between a dean and executive assistant may not be transferable. If not, the executive assistant should understand and be accommodating if a new dean determines a change is desirable. The new dean should work within human resources policies and advocate for an attractive reassignment for an executive assistant in cases when performance of duties was not a problem.

An executive assistant is instrumental to the highest functioning of the dean as well as for the success of the broader college and university and its leadership teams, staff, and faculty. Attending to these characteristics and orientations ensures the executive assistant is a good fit for the requirements of supporting a dean and is able to play his crucial part in the dean’s success.

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