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CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS: 360 EVALUATION AND EXECUTIVE SESSION

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“Best practice”, right? Not in the opinion of this Consultant who has seen firsthand the damage that these two practices can bring about for schools, heads and boards.

360 Evaluation

This is a corporate model that has been bandied about for years until certain associations decided that it was part of the best practices protocol. However, the world of corporations and schools are very different.

Think about this: In what corporate context does the CEO have board members whose children are influenced by the CEO’s employees? In the school world, feedback from older children about their teachers and school environment absolutely affects the opinions of parent board members. We have witnessed this phenomenon all over the world. Teachers do influence their students especially in history, English, politics and economics classes; students do influence their parents; and parents are often the dominant force on the Board.

In our experience, we have found that this method of conducting head evaluation by seeking a wide range of stakeholder feedback tends to be used primarily in these settings:

- A. Brand new heads who may be too naïve to know the consequences of this approach;
- B. Towering heads, or those whose power base is sturdy and have no fear of being knocked off their perch; or
- C. Heads who are on a slippery slope with their boards and where the boards want this tool to determine for sure whether the head should stay or go.

Recently, a new school Head called me. He had been in the job 18 months on a three year contract and his chair told him that his evaluation by the board was excellent and that his contract would be extended another two years. The Chair then told him that the Board would interview personally and confidentially each of his six direct reports to gain further insights into his performance. Being new and having received an excellent evaluation, the Head saw no harm in this. After the interviews with



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the administrators, the Chair told him he was fired, effective at the end of that year. What happened? I asked him how many, if any, of the six senior administrators on his leadership team had expressed an interest in or been a formal candidate for the head position that he now held. He told me: “Three!”

Executive Session

The intent of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act was to bring better governance practices to the corporate board room but many business leaders brought some of its concepts into the school board room. This was well intentioned, of course, but there have been some very unpleasant consequences.

Executive session is an example of practice that developed in the business realm but when it is applied to the school world, it becomes a dangerous one. Many board members tell me that it is not harmful or threatening to the head to go into executive session at each meeting because then the head will see it as routine and “normal”. I can tell you for sure that heads do not read it that way. What is said in those sessions is often an exchange of rumors and misinformation that the presence of the head could quickly clarify. How often do chairs in a timely basis update the head on exactly what transpired in that session? Rarely.

When I have argued against executive sessions, board members have said, “But we need to say things that we cannot say in front of the head.” Such as? They may say, for example, “the sad state of the math program”, or more seriously, “the head’s defensive response to criticism.” If the board cannot have these conversations with the head in the room, either it has the wrong head or the wrong board member(s).

Executive session and 360 are overbearing tools for solving issues where solutions could be more finessed.

The Recommended Process for Head Evaluation

Effective evaluation of a head of school begins with the creation of a Head Support Committee, as a standing committee of the Board charged annually with benchmarking the head’s compensation, overseeing the evaluation process and renewing his or her contract on behalf of the Board.

The head evaluation process should begin with the Head Support Committee (generally three members including the Chair) who meets with the head in the spring of the year to set goals. These goals should be limited to no more than five and clearly represent the school’s overall strategic



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goals as well as the goals for the head. The Committee then brings these goals to the fall board meeting for open discussion, approval and/or modification, if necessary. Then every board member has buy-in.

In mid-year, the Committee meets again with the Head to ask for progress relative to the agreed upon goals. In the spring, the chair solicits feedback in writing from every board member, confidentially and focuses ONLY on the goals earlier approved (not new ones). The chair tabulates the results and then the Committee meets again with the head to talk through his or her own self-evaluation that has been completed in the same time frame. From this discussion comes a two page summary of commendations for work done well and recommendations for work still needing to be done.

The chair reads the summary at the last board meeting of the academic year and then files it. There is no open discussion at the board level of the head's strengths and weaknesses or a discussion of personal flaws. That would be unprofessional. The process described above is meant to ensure all board members have a voice in setting the goals and evaluating success in achieving those goals.

There are indices of success that a Board can monitor over time to assess the accomplishments and leadership of a head's success. You know instinctively what they are. Over a five year period all, or almost all of the following should be trending upward unless there is a recession like the one we had in 2008-2010. Here are a few:

- Enrollment and retention
- Balanced budgets
- Fundraising
- College or secondary school placement
- Achievement test scores
- Reputation
- Alumni support and giving
- Overall parent satisfaction
- Faculty and staff morale
- Creative programming
- Hiring record

Head evaluation, compensation and contract renewal all deserve a thoughtful supportive process. Heads should know the protocols, agree with them, and all boards should take the time annually for a formal head evaluation process, review the compensation package annually and benchmark it against US and/or international standards. Finally, boards should remember that healthy board governance is crucial to the retention of heads long term, and 360 and frequent executive session



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are threats to retention. There is an absolute correlation of longer term board members and longer term chairs to longer term heads and there is an absolute correlation of longer term heads to more effective and financially sustainable schools.

A word of advice to Heads: Boards tells us that their biggest criticism of the head is always giving the good news, positive events, high scores but rarely sharing the risks, worries, threats or situations that have gone or are going wrong. Heads tell us they do this in order to avoid inviting boards to micromanage the solutions to these issues. Both sides are right and both are wrong. Heads must be more honest and boards should listen, offer advice where warranted but allow the head to do his or her job.