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BOARD/HEAD COLLABORATION: THE STRESS POINTS AND THE REWARDS

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Today, heads of school are truly CEOs needing to take the lead in making key, sometimes life changing decisions affecting entire families. As they should be doing in normal times, boards still need now to turn over the reins of operational leadership to the head of school, however tempting it may be to step in and try to “help”. Speed, accuracy, and being on point are going to be hallmarks of a good leader.

However, heads also must have the support of their boards and collaboration with not only the chair, but with the entire board. Heads need to use their political skills to draw out, use and celebrate the unique talents of board members who can assist heads with understanding the consequences of their decisions especially about the reopening of schools and the health protocols needed.

Heads should also consider forming appropriate advisory groups or committees in order to tap into the expertise of parents and alumni for the sole purpose of helping the head evaluate new information, daily governmental changes of policy, and updates on the virus. These are not permanent committees but short term advisory groups. This can be a delicate move as those who serve will need to understand that they do not make decisions; they only provide input.

Leadership is collaboration. It includes the ability to spot talent, mobilize that talent and praise and acknowledge it, whether it is found in the staff, board and/or other stakeholder groups. Leadership is also taking appropriate risks that ultimately will be the decision of the head/leader/CEO, and he or she will be held accountable.

Three governance themes worry this Consultant during the current crisis:

1. Heads who are acting without appropriate collaboration and consent from their boards.
2. Boards who are intruding too much in the planning for re-opening and creating a Pandora's box of opinions and inputs that the head cannot possibly use, satisfy or even hear as heads are currently operating on overload.
3. Failing to recognize that heads need nurturing, support, appreciation and understanding.



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Without that, leaders cannot function effectively and their personal health and family life will suffer.

I. Some Heads of School are Leading with Insufficient Board Collaboration or Consent

These heads are not only missing key information and input that could be useful but frankly are risking losing the support of the board politically. That in turn may result in individual board members undercutting the head by paying too much attention to parent and alumni complaints. In the worst case scenario, these heads may receive a poor evaluation leading to the non-renewal of their contracts.

Heads ARE or SHOULD be politicians. Let's face it, good manipulation, i.e., knowing how to listen, gain support and buy in before leading, is a good, not a bad thing. Heads who build personal relationships with every board member can then call on their support at a time of crisis. Good management of a board can take up to 40% of a head's time. Do not be surprised by that percentage. Unfortunately, too few heads make this investment of their time, and are even less likely to do so during this crisis.

Great school heads with long tenure can testify to that, but of course those heads tend also to have longer serving boards, longer serving chairs, and more institutional memory.

II. There Have Been even more Examples of Board Intrusion in this Pandemic

One of the key responsibilities of a board is legitimate fiscal oversight. In some current cases, however, board intrusion into operations and management has been so overreaching and knee jerk that boards can cause and are causing long-term damage to the financial health of their schools. Short-term oriented boards are tending to cut budgets, staff and programs even when there is a healthy surplus, rainy day fund or endowment.

Investors and owners of some for-profit schools are still pulling out of their schools as much money as they did prior to the pandemic. This is leaving their heads in the very difficult position of trying to offer excellence with budget cuts up to 25%. That is not possible. In these cases, short-term decisions will lead to long-term loss of reputation and enrollment. The investors and owners will have killed the golden goose.

III. Nurturing the Head Should be a Priority Now for Boards

Heads are under even more pressure these days and sacrificing their family life. They should know that their efforts are appreciated both in words, deeds and actions and rewarded through compensation. This is not a great time for head of school searches. This is a great time for heads to stay a year longer (or two) and for boards to stand by them.



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Where a change at the top must occur, developing a very clear, written record of actions taken by both sides could be important. Both search committees and head candidates will be looking at why the head left. Otherwise rumors drive search decisions and that is unhealthy.

Keep in mind that 80% of all heads end up fired. And 80% of THOSE are fired in their first five years. Those statistics have NOT changed over many years now. The average tenure of an international school heads is a little over 3 years and for US based school heads a little over 5 years. It is not a pretty picture. And it may get worse depending on how boards and heads collaborate in the months ahead and possibly even longer.

Littleford & Associates coaches/mentors heads and chairs, conducts virtual and on site workshops on governance and transition; and guides boards in their head searches and in benchmarking compensation for heads of schools (where we work only for boards).