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BROADENING GOVERNANCE TRAINING: A LESSON TO BE LEARNED

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Recently, a Client retained this Consultant for a workshop on the topic of board governance but for a different audience. Over a period of five years, this Consultant has trained and guided the Board as its knowledge of good governance practices became more sophisticated and as it added new Board members. In this particular year, however, the governance session was for the ten members of the senior leadership team minus the Head who was on sabbatical. The Head thought it might be beneficial and interesting for the senior Administrators to be exposed to the same messages that the Board typically receives and to engage in the same Harvard Business School case study approach to problem-solving.

This is a leadership team with whom I have worked several times. It is made up of wise, analytical, yet passionate and driven individuals from the US, Australia, the UK, and the host country. I have come to know and respect this team as I have watched them grapple with issues such as how to develop a better faculty appraisal process and how to improve the faculty salary system. But I had never heard them discuss the dynamics of board business and their own potential relationship to a board of an international school.

We began the workshop by talking about worldwide trends in head tenure, board composition, the loss of institutional memory on boards and the need for more strategic thinking. We covered the core principles of good practice and their relationship to school accreditation and a range of issues such as: confidentiality within the ranks; board chair/board relationships; the board chair/head relationship; the role of the head and board in managing constituents; and "crossing boundaries." We discussed as well how often board members fall into unhealthy behaviors that stem ultimately from their roles as parents, or alumni or both.

The group by this time was very engaged in giving examples of how they sometimes get caught off guard by well intentioned board members seeking to deal with them directly, sometimes side stepping the Head or in this case potentially bypassing the Acting Head. Finally, we analyzed a case study based upon an actual situation about a School under some enrollment stress and whose well-meaning Board members were drawn into the management domain to assist. These Board members



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did not know how to structure their engagement and when to disengage. In observing the two groups of five discussing the case, I was impressed by the intelligence, depth of knowledge and especially the core common sense that these Leadership Team members exhibited.

The Acting Head was proud of them, and the Head on a well-deserved sabbatical would have been very proud of their teamwork. They grew in their knowledge and understanding of the sometimes precarious path that heads walk with their boards. As one Team member and a veteran of several well-known Schools remarked later, "This was one of the best PD opportunities I have ever had."

The point here is simple: To heads, it might be a good idea to engage your senior leadership team in an exercise of walking in the shoes of a head or board member; and to boards, it might be valuable to you because this activity gives the team a deeper understanding of the respective roles of the board and the head, and how to recognize micromanaging versus strategic discussions and behaviors. It may also create a deeper, more sophisticated potential pool of inside candidates for the headship someday, or it may help senior leaders make much better heads if they leave to lead another school.

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