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FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT INTERNAL SUCCESSION

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Many school heads and some boards know that still today up to 70% of all heads are fired, most often meaning that their contracts are not be renewed. However, most will land other headships and will not have the circumstances of their departures known publicly.

The reasons for such high turnover continue to be imbedded in the politics and turnover of boards, the loss of institutional memory on boards, the failure of the head/chair partnership and the lack of knowledge by heads about how to move into a school culture and monitor it carefully before undertaking potentially unsettling change.

Most heads become undone by the nature and pace of changes they institute, often at the behest of their own boards. Search committees set unreasonably high expectations and goals for a new head, as well as overly aggressive timetables for achieving the desired changes.

More than 90% of independent schools in the US choose an external candidate and the majority of those will be "fired" within 3-6 years. The 10% that choose internal candidates will have a much higher success record, and most internal candidates succeed and stay long term. Why is this?

Of course, promoting from within is more complicated than it appears. Multiple internal candidates will complicate the search, cause political divisiveness in the school, and raise risks for outside successors if one of the insiders is not chosen. If there is one powerful internal candidate who is popular but for whatever reason does not receive the "nod", then the opportunity for political misbehavior and undermining by the faculty and possibly the parents during the new head's term is raised substantially. Unpopular change can be subtly thwarted by the disappointed internal candidate. Of course, quite often internal candidates overcome their disappointment and simply work with the new person.

Search committees need to counsel strongly against the consideration of any internal candidates if it is clear from the outset that they are not strong prospects, and the purposes of carrying them along in the search are solely to make them feel better and to appease constituents. Instead this almost always ultimately makes them feel worse, more disappointed and thus to some extent, more dangerous to the successful transition to an outside head of school.



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So why is it that so many internal candidates, if chosen, DO succeed? Internal candidates know the culture, the players, the politics, and the history. If they have been highly regarded by the faculty, board, parents and students and even alumni, they begin their tenure with major political capital. Insufficient internal political capital trips up most new heads who make changes without having earned and accumulated the capital first.

Internal candidates, even genuinely viable ones, are passed over most often because "familiarity breeds contempt". Many board members want a new start, want to test the national market, and feel that an internal candidate may be "captured" by the culture, reluctant to make needed changes and lacking the vision to improve the program and curriculum. On the other hand, internal candidates have the greater ability to implement change effectively because they know how much the culture can endure and how various key or powerful individuals within the faculty, board and parent body may respond to certain kinds of change.

The stronger and more unique the internal culture, the more the school should seriously consider appointing an internal candidate and foregoing the cost, "excitement" and stress of a search. If the culture is a strong, distinct one admired by many, and if it is a hallmark of the school, then an internal candidate is almost always the stronger leading choice. This ASSUMES that the Board has enough information to know that the insider possesses the strength of character to be a change agent when appropriate and not JUST a conservator of the culture.

Should there be a search if there is a strong viable internal candidate? Many consultants and boards would say "yes" as in theory, the search then strengthens the credentials of the internal candidate if he or she is chosen eventually. They want to be able to say that one or more internal candidates were compared to a national market and "we" still chose the insider so he or she must be the best one.

This can be a false scenario. Most often searches with very strong internal candidates drive away strong external candidates who can sense the tone and sniff the wind. They also know full well the odds against being selected or succeeding if chosen over a popular and powerful internal candidate. In this consultant's view, there are occasions when it is better in this circumstance NOT to conduct a national search but RATHER to undertake a subtle set of interviews or focus groups with key constituents in advance to decide whether a search is really needed.

In the corporate world, it is common to provide for internal succession, but that seldom happens in independent schools. Why? Control is often the defining trait of a powerful, successful and long term head. However, such control also leads to the head's natural reluctance to allow internal heirs apparent. Such successful heads may launch their careers elsewhere, but in fact one sign of a wise head can be one where over the years many strong second tier administrators are trained



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successfully to lead their own schools.

However, it is also a good idea to have at least one internal leader whom it is obvious to all could lead the school if the need arose and in whom the head and board have great confidence. It is not impossible to build internal succession into the head transition process. It does fly in the face of the kind of leaders we have tended to choose in the past, with a high need for control and therefore a great reluctance to hire strong internal leaders who could become the next head. A controlling leader DOES ensure mission integrity. It also makes it difficult, however, for insiders to be chosen who can and will succeed.

If external hires fail and are fired so often and if internal candidates are seldom appointed but almost always succeed when they are, then the whole search process and expectations of schools and boards needs to be reviewed seriously for major flaws in our expectations and our searches.

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