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FOLLOWING A "FOUNDER" AND CAN YOU SURVIVE?

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Most schools founded by an individual began as Montessori schools or small progressive elementary schools. Some founders launched Pre K to 8 Schools, and a rare few founded a high school and/or a boarding school. Often these schools carry the Head's family name and are located on the estate/home of the founder or his/her family.

But the definition of "founder" used here is broader. It means anyone who has been the head of school for so long that almost no one remembers a prior head because the impact of this individual, who may have stayed 15, 20, 30 years or more has been so profound. The school is the head personified.

When these quasi-founders depart, there are, or should be a different set of principles applicable to searches, transitions and governance. Very long-term heads can leave great legacies but they can also leave weak boards. They usually hand pick their board members. These boards may be very far removed from the operations of the school and while that is generally a good thing, having repeatedly deferred to the head without question, the board may have lost contact with the tone of the faculty, the sentiment among the parents or the experiences of recent graduates.

These heads may also have delegated not much power (or perhaps too much power) to the senior management team. The senior management team or faculty may be eager to fill the power vacuum that the departing head leaves, thereby making it almost impossible for an external search candidate to succeed. Under these circumstances the best successor may be an internal appointee whom the current head admires, likes personally and prefers even though the Board might go through the window dressing of conducting a search.

Often these insiders can build the necessary bridge to the board (and strengthen it) while not running afoul of the departing head. While the departing head may indicate that he or she wants a clean break, the reality is that no one can let go quickly or entirely from their "baby" into which they have sunk a large part or the greater part of their lives. The insider generally can keep some connections to the "founder" and yet still be able to push back against the former head when that is necessary.



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One founding elementary school Head left her school over fifteen years ago. Since then there have been five Heads including short term, mid- term and interims, all of whom the Founder has undermined to some degree. The only one who succeeded on some level was the former Associate Head who was favored by the Founder and came back to "rescue" the School when one of the five succeeding Heads was fired. This founding Head still cannot let go and is influencing dramatically the parents, teachers, and board members many of whom were students there when she was the Head. Now fifteen years after "retirement" this former Head again is influencing another head search.

One very long-term retiring Head attempted to "stack the deck" against the new Head. In her last year, she tried to give the faculty raises that the board had not approved. She left many skeletons in the closet and surprises for the new Head and for the Board as well. The Board, to its credit, gave the outgoing Head a proper send-off.

Those external appointees who follow founders tend stay two to five years at most and in the long run may be considered "middle men" or "sacrificial lambs". Following founders is not an assignment for those lacking "fire in the belly" and strong survival instincts.

A rule of thumb: Over 90% of head searches result in outsiders being hired and over 80% of them are fired or moved on after 5 years or less. Only 10% of head searches result in an internal appointment but only 10% of those folks are "fired." However, a cautionary note to those who support internal succession planning (as this Consultant does in certain circumstances) over external succession hiring: Even insiders can miscalculate by betting too much and too fast on changes they wish to make in the hopes that their political capital with their peer group is high enough to withstand, for example, a reinvigorated teacher evaluation process. These internal successors can be proven wrong as they too must be cautious about what kind of change they initiate and how fast they do it.

As part of its head of school search services, Littleford & Associates provides counsel on the unique circumstances surrounding the departure of founders or heads who are leaving that kind of legacy. The search process is much more than finding candidates; it includes ensuring that the ultimate choice is successful.