FOLLOWING A LONG TERM HEAD

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There may not be many long term heads these days, although there should be. Following one can be a challenge for the successor unless the successor is an internal hire. We define a long-term head as a founder and also one who has been a relatively successful head of the same school for 10 to 15 years or longer. Given the NAIS average head tenure average of 5 years, in Canada of 7 years and in international schools of about 3.5 years, these long tenured heads are becoming rare.

Based upon our Firm’s experience, choosing a strong internal candidate following a long-term head is often the safest route for a school. Some schools DO have strong internal candidates who have been groomed for succession by the head, but most heads do not undertake any formal succession planning.

We have observed two typical styles of long-term heads. One type is highly controlling and tends not to delegate well. However, that head knows everything and everybody and has a close connection to stakeholders. That style works well unless it is a very large school.

There are fewer of the other type. They ride above the fray, are “presidential” in tone and style and tend not to know the names of many students or be especially close with teachers. However, they know their boards, they raise money successfully. and they are big picture types who do find talented staff who could lead their own schools. The president type of head does delegate well. They engage in succession planning although if they are very long term, the people they are prepping go off to lead other schools successfully. This Consultant can think of one long-term Head, who during his 30 year tenure, placed (in effect) 8 of his senior leaders as heads of other prominent independent schools.

Internal succession planning is important and most boards ask heads to consider it. Eighty percent of all heads are “fired” and 80% of them in their first five years, but only 10% of insiders who are appointed are fired. There is strong evidence that internal succession planning is preferable because insiders often know the pace and type of change that faculty will tolerate; they honor traditions; and usually keep a good relationship with the longer term departing head who may still own substantial political capital.
However, when a new head is appointed from the outside and follows a longer term successful head, that new head is at great risk. If there is no interim appointed and there is a rushed search to fill the position, the successor often becomes the “sacrificial lamb” lasting usually three years only before the next longer term head is appointed. Search committees, however, often know these risks but just cannot fathom having an interim as they want to move quickly to address many agendas.

There is a good case to be made for interim heads following a long term leader. And there are and have been some outstanding ones. They not only hold the fort for a year (or two) but they can often make tough decisions, can determine where the bodies are buried and clear the “rubbish” out a bit before the new head arrives.

New heads need a honeymoon period of at least a year with no major decisions taken, especially personnel firings or similar threatening actions. New heads typically get in trouble in their third year and if they survive their fifth year may be able to choose a long term commitment to that school (or leave of their own volition)

So our argument is really three fold:

1. Long term heads are incredibly valuable but boards must plan carefully for their succession.
2. Internal succession planning is often far better for the school than going outside much to the chagrin of search firms. An “executive assessment” conducted by an independent consultant can determine if the inside candidate is a fit. This is something short of a full search. Our Firm has undertaken many of these assessments, and most have resulted in a total commitment to a valued insider.
3. When a long-term head leaves or retires, if there is no viable internal candidate, boards should strongly consider an experienced interim before appointing the ultimate successor.

Searches these days are best done with 18 months notice. Transitions take three to five years. During that period, many opportunities may be lost or overlooked, so boards and schools need stability. You have heard this before: long-term boards lead to long-term chairs who lead to long-term heads who lead to stability, financial sustainability, strong reputation and mission consistency