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GOVERNANCE IN THE TRENCHES: SOME SOLUTIONS

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The Case Study

This School had a long-term valued Head, a strong board and long-term Chair which are the key characteristics of a stable and successful school. However, some changes at the School were overdue, and after many years, the Head agreed to step down and the Board took good care of him and his family financially. It is not uncommon for very long-term heads to feel that their time is not yet up when the board may feel that it is.

The new Head was an internal pick. An internal appointee is often the best choice to follow a head with a long history at a school. With the support of a wise Chair, the transition seemed to be going well. However, a curriculum issue caused substantial friction at the parent level, and almost all Board Members were present parents. Boards composed of 100% current parents, elected, appointed or a combination of both, are always going to face more governance challenges than those that have a mix of current and former parents, alumni, grandparents and a few key outsiders. Even then, the members must behave as if they do not represent their particular “group”.

Three new Board Members replaced three long-term ones who had “centered” the Board in its policy-making. The new Members lacked that institutional memory and focused on more immediate performance and test score outcomes, better college placement, happier parents, etc. and the Head’s style and decision-making came under fire. They got into the weeds, and support for both the Head and the Chair began to weaken. The Board separated into two clear factions. Seasoned Board Members wanted the newer ones to “cool their heels”.

All of this was happening just as Covid-19 hit the community. While the parents were pleased that School was in session and parents were generally happy with the Head’s reopening plans and protocols, the ideological splits within the Board widened. Basic questions of identity arose: whom do we serve? What is our mission? The demographics of the community began to change as new parent families in the locale enrolled while other families who had rushed elsewhere during the pandemic decided they could not or would not come back immediately. An old axiom is: you are whom you admit. This means that your mission will change and become what the new families say



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it is, regardless of the founding mission words.

The Head felt pummeled in the middle of all of this.

The Resolution

An outside, objective voice helped unify the Board, the Board added a new Member with some reflective history, and there was a renewed appreciation for the very hard work of the Chair and Head. The newer board members realized that they needed to respect institutional memory more, but others also heard their legitimate views and embraced some of their ideas.

Both the Head and Chair realized they had to work on other key partnerships. The Chair had to rebuild his relationships to all Board Members, and the Head had to spend more time getting to know better each and every board member, not just the Chair. They needed to create a more robust Committee on Trustees/Nominating Committee. The Chair planned to appoint a highly respected Chair of that Committee, and around that person build the protocols to recruit and vet mission appropriate Members who are wise team players. It is never a good idea for the board chair and COT chair to be the same person.

For this Board, things are now moving in the right direction and a greater sense of unity is apparent.

The Board and Head are committed to reviewing and living by best board practices and to preserving institutional memory by perhaps bringing back a former Board Member or appointing a Trustee Emeritus or two.

They are learning from their recent history of successes and failures as we all must do.