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LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT A NEW HEAD AND MAINTAIN SCHOOL STABILITY

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A Board of Trustees begins the search for a new head of school under a variety of circumstances ranging from the departure of a beloved, long-term head to the sudden resignation or dismissal of a head after three years or less of service.

In most schools, a carefully selected, committee leads the search with the guidance of a qualified outside consultant, but a smooth transition is by no means guaranteed.

The search committee and the board of trustees as a whole are often unaware of the risks inherent in the transition of leadership and the potentially dangerous political climate the new head will encounter in the early years, depending upon the following:

- **Length of service of the preceding head;**
- the tenure and culture of the faculty; and

1. the issues mandating gradual or immediate change within the school

The real or perceived pace and nature of that change are also critical.

Boards are usually unaware that the transition period lasts from one to three years. Very few boards understand transition concepts and actually implement strategies to support the new head and guide the school through the difficult transition period.

Board, administration, faculty, parents and students usually have high expectations for the outcome of the search process. The new head may represent a "fresh start", but will not have the "political capital" of the former leader, and may not yet have the skills and experience to initiate positive, sometimes sweeping change to further the fundamental mission of the school. This is a very tall



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order for any new leader. Most changes of leadership in schools usually occur under one of two scenarios

1. The Circumstances of Transition- Following a Long-term Head

One common scenario is the departure of a long-term head who was popular with the various constituencies of the school community and leaves on good terms. In this instance, the key considerations in understanding the transition period are the following:

1. The leadership style of the new head. Through interviews with hundreds of trustees while assisting client schools in governance, compensation and head evaluation, Littleford & Associates has observed the following pattern: the longer the prior head's tenure, the greater the tendency for the search committee unconsciously to select a replacement with a very different, even opposite leadership and personal style.

For example, a long-standing head may have been an "amiable", who tends to avoid conflict or confrontation, or an "expressive" type who is also inclined to avoid difficult decisions and focus instead on building connections with faculty, parents and trustees. These styles can be effective for a while, but can lead to long-term problems and complacency.

As a result, the pendulum frequently swings in the opposite direction, as the new head is chosen for his/ her "driven" style, or willingness to tackle the controversial issues. Faculty, accustomed to the friendly, agreeable style of their prior leader, fear the new "driver", and may undermine him/her thus insuring the new leader's departure within three years.

1. "Political capital". "Political capital" is the reservoir of good will that the head has gradually built with the faculty by representing their interests to the board, particularly with respect to compensation, supporting their professional development, nurturing them personally, and shielding them from unreasonable parent demands. The political capital that a head accumulates over time allows the head to make a mistake, or take action viewed as unpopular with the teachers without damaging prospects for survival and hence, the stability of the school.

Boards are often unmindful of the fact that the replacement of the long-term Head leaves the new school leadership with NO reservoir of political capital with the faculty. Often heads, who served many years, cultivated relationships with influential teachers and developed favorites, all of whom remain loyal to the former head and that head's comfortable style.



1. "Change" Issues. A board may ask the new head to address difficult issues that may not have been a top priority for either the prior head or the board. Or, the previous, long standing head may have been an "absentee landlord" in his later years, and now, the board may be understandably eager to move on new initiatives. These may include:

- Changes in salary structure, perhaps involving performance pay.
- Development of a credible evaluation process, versus a peer review or professional growth model without administrative oversight.
- A broad-based strategic planning process involving administration, faculty, parents, alumni and students. This may stir up a "hornet's nest" among those who feel threatened by change.
- Schedule changes that are always disruptive to teachers, but may seem relatively minor to the administration.
- Workload increases which teachers usually perceive as burdensome, no matter how "light" their prior class and preparation time may actually have been.
- Termination of a teacher or change in a division head, both of which cause anxiety for the faculty.
- Changes in board chair. A supportive and stable board/head relationship is critical to the head's survival and the institution's stability in first three "transition" years.

It is a serious mistake to ask a new head, having no political capital with faculty, to undertake any of these changes too quickly. Any head, following a long-term leader, must "lay low" for the first year or two, in order to study the legacy of his predecessor, assess the climate among the teachers and build political capital with the faculty.

In one school, a new, "process-oriented" head followed a long-term, popular head with a substantial reservoir of political capital with faculty. The new head received a mandate for change from the board. At the end of the new head's first year, the Board, uniformed about faculty salaries in similar schools, also approved a low, across the board percentage faculty pay increase for the following year.

The faculty believed that the new head was unwilling to represent their most important interest to the board. The head's political capital dropped from its initial starting point of zero, to the negative range. Teachers, in regular conversations or in social settings with trustees, began to undermine the head. Channels of communications were inappropriate, and boundaries of authority were circumvented. The transition period, which would have been difficult in any event, became



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protracted and even more stressful to the head and to the institution.

1. Following a Short-term Head

If the previous head was short-term, disliked, forced out or widely viewed as ineffective at the end of his tenure, then his/her legacy is often slightly tarnished. There has been insufficient time for the prior head to amass that important, intangible asset: political capital. **In this instance, the key to understanding the transition period is the concept of the "power vacuum".**

The Power Vacuum- The Absence of Clear Leadership

In this second scenario, the new head enters an environment where real power has devolved to the faculty and/or to the board. In the absence of strong leadership at the helm, the board may have meddled in the day-to-day operations of the school, as opposed to functioning as a policy board.

The board perceives the hiring of a new head as the opportunity to reverse this pattern of ineffective leadership and frequent head turnover. They may ask the new head to take steps to regain lost power, such as initiating a teacher evaluation system to force accountability for performance or perhaps target long-term faculty viewed as being resistant to change.

Faculty, perhaps led by the longer-term teachers who represent institutional memory and culture, may go to the board in a move to unseat the new head. Having stirred up faculty anxiety, the head is fired, and the cycle of turnover begins again.

When a new head enters a situation where the faculty and/or board has filled a power vacuum, it is again crucial that the head not move too quickly to initiate changes that the faculty perceive as threatening, despite the temptations and pressures to do so.

1. The Role of the Board in the Transition Period

Through confidential interviews with hundreds of trustees and heads of school, Littleford & Associates has observed the above themes and patterns of behavior in many client schools having just completed searches in this age of high head turnover. Based on our firm's extensive experience and expertise in the area of leadership transition, we offer the following recommendations.

1. Support the Head through Good Governance

Support the head fully and completely; board chairs and trustees must stand tall and defend the head against inevitable criticisms from faculty and parents.

Ensure the health of the head/board chair relationship, and avoid transition at the board chair



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level.

Recognize the danger of close teacher/trustee and teacher/parent communications; inappropriate channels of communication undermine the head's ability to lead and may threaten institutional stability.

Establish a clear, formal and appropriate process to evaluate and guide the head on an annual basis; avoid evaluation outside of these established parameters and/or outside of the boardroom. Teachers do NOT participate in head evaluation.

In conjunction with this evaluation process, establish and communicate realistic and manageable, expectations to the head. Set goals that build, not endanger political capital.

Counsel the head on the school's culture, potential political pitfalls, the unique profile of the faculty, and the legacy, if any, of the prior head.

1. Support the Head through an Effective Committee on Trustees

In previous articles, the author has emphasized that the nominating committee, or the committee on trustees, is, or should be the most powerful subcommittee on the board, although in many schools, it is sadly neglected, inactive or ineffective. This committee has two primary responsibilities, both of which directly impact the head during years one through three of the transition period: the evaluation of the head, board and the board chair; and the cultivation, recruitment, training and evaluation of all trustees.

The committee on trustees must function as a critical support mechanism for any head of school, but especially for the new head during the early transition years. The committee must actively engage in the recruitment, screening and selection of trustees who support the head's vision of the school. It should not identify or nominate any candidate whom the head has not met and "vetted" in an informal setting where that individual is unaware of his potential candidacy.

Recruiting or selecting any trustee, who cannot work with the head or who does not share his/her vision for the school, helps to create an unhealthy political climate conducive to the head's untimely departure or dismissal.

By evaluating trustees through an annual, formal process and providing on-going training in healthy board governance, the committee on trustees monitors and corrects inappropriate trustee behavior that undermines both the head's ability to lead, and ultimately, the health of the institution. In examining individual trustee performance, the committee must particularly counsel board members on using appropriate channels of communication and evaluating the head within the established parameters. Merely verbal support of the head is inadequate; trustees must be



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educated in the wisdom and practice of supporting the head fully until the board has made a rational, informed decision not to retain the head.

It is also the key responsibility of the committee on trustees to preserve institutional memory by avoiding frequent turnover or trustees and board chairs. The board must hold "in trust" institutional memory, or it will fall to the faculty, and the stage is then set for the "power vacuum" scenario.

1. Support the Head Outside of the School

Boards often overlook the need to nurture the head outside of the school. Boards should lend additional, important support to the head by providing adequate financial resources that make the physical move for the head and his family as smooth as possible. Upon his/her arrival, the board should also assist the head's spouse and children in making a smooth adjustment in their new home and school lives.

Through workshops on board governance, Littleford & Associates has assisted many client schools in understanding the key concepts of leadership transition and developing strategies to avoid common pitfalls, recurrent head turnover, and hence, institutional stability. With an understanding of leadership transition issues, boards can take proactive measures to ensure that the head moves beyond the difficult transition years and into the period when he/she can make a significant and lasting impact upon the school.

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