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## "MANAGING SCHOOL CLIMATE-AND NOT LETTING IT MANAGE YOU!"

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The key ingredient in developing and maintaining a healthy school climate is faculty morale. While board, parent and student morale are very important, they tend to flow, negatively or positively, from faculty morale.

Boards often provide strong directives to the head. If always followed, these directives can sometimes lead to a significant drop in faculty morale. When boards have just finished a search process for a new head, they tend to lay out their expectations for the head very clearly. And those expectations, if acted upon too quickly, can lead to tension within the school and radically unhealthy changes in school climate.

The issues that most dramatically affect faculty climate and morale are:

1. **THE FREQUENCY, NATURE AND SUBJECTS OF PROPOSED OR ACTUAL CHANGE.** The areas of change that pose the greatest risks are changes in leadership, compensation structures or levels, work load changes, creating or changing the teacher evaluation process, changes in curriculum or schedules, and changes in the school's financial health that may threaten the teachers' sense of the school's, and therefore their own, financial security.

A change in heads causes great anxiety to teachers. No matter how much they may have been involved in the search process, they are uneasy about change at the top. During a new head's first or second year, the old adage about laying low and reading the terrain is crucial. But in some schools, heads may not have the luxury of waiting long to address important issues of hiring, enrollment growth etc. Board members, who may be short term themselves, want to see changes made immediately to benefit their own children.

Changes in compensation structure, or the initiation of a new evaluation process, is a demand frequently placed on new heads as well as current ones. These are exceptionally risky areas. And yet they form the core elements of school's ability to attract, hold and assess good people. They also help keep the school accountable. But moving cautiously is important here.

The Board will press on the one hand for more rapid movement, especially in exploring merit



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pay concepts. The faculty will usually press for delay and more process. Teachers will generally oppose moves in the direction of merit pay. However this opposition is softening among many faculties. The reason for this attitude change is because most teachers now realize that significant future salary increases will not be approved by boards unless there is major change in the salary administration and design process.

Work load changes or any change in working conditions, however small and inconsequential they may seem to the head, often are more important than issues the head and the board see as the major ones.

Faculty climate and resistance to change can be improved by the head who really does "manage by walking around".

Heads who are always off campus, always delegate faculty liaison to others, or who are almost invisible in the faculty room and hallways risk the loss of respect and "granted power." They may still hold "positional power", but that alone will not provide the buffer zones needed by leadership in times of crisis.

2. LEADERSHIP/FOLLOWER ISSUES: These are the natural tensions that arise from attempting to lead teachers who often have a strong sense of independence and a natural resistance to and suspicion of strong authority. An important element here is the degree to which a head does or does not delegate authority wisely. Too much authority delegated in the wrong way to the wrong people in the wrong areas can be very dangerous. Not delegating appropriate authority when and where it is needed is equally dangerous, although the damage takes longer to appear.

One head recently found himself cornered in an increasingly defensive posture when his entire administrative team wanted to buffer him from faculty unhappiness and morale issues. The division directors also did not want the head to know what kind of feedback teachers had about them. A faculty committee had developed as a kind of "shadow government" to represent teacher interests. The friction between administration and faculty was palpable. The log jam was broken only when the Head had the personal courage to embrace the concept of inviting the chair of the faculty committee to sit in regularly on administrative council meetings. Though this move was opposed by some of the administration, it prompted the faculty committee to extend a similar invitation to the head.

Within one year a much more supportive faculty committee was elected, people with whom the Head could work more cooperatively. And that cooperation has led to significant work together as teachers and administration with successful resolution to issues that would have been too explosive to tackle a year before.



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This head also had the foresight to laugh at himself and his own foibles, and to be self deprecating in front of his faculty, demonstrating a welcome sense of humor. That prompted the faculty to laugh with him and not at him. In one session like this, the head's stock soared with the faculty who saw a different picture of a head whom they had previously viewed as cold, aloof and humorless. He is now "out and about" on the hustings and in the corridors much more often.

3. THE NATURE AND MAKE UP OF THE FACULTY: Replacing grumpy, unhappy, cynical teachers with ones who are more energetic or committed or loyal can dramatically improve a school's climate overnight. Conversely hiring the wrong teachers can be a career and school threatening mistake that may not be easily remedied.

Most schools try to recruit the smartest, or best prepared teachers in terms of subject matter knowledge or proven teaching experience. Some schools place a great deal of stock in teachers with a track record of extensive teaching experience, more often than not in the public schools. But public school attitudes do not always translate well to independent and international schools.

Heads seldom thoroughly examine attitudes, loyalty factors, affinity with the school's mission, or a teacher's willingness to cooperate and handle pressure well.

This author advocates personality testing before hiring. The first step is to do a personality profile of the current faculty to see what kind of emotional mix of teachers in the school. It is unhealthy to hire too many of the same personality types, for example. A school filled with bright ambitious, driven teachers often does not result in a faculty that will accept leadership willingly.

The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory is one of the most commonly used devices to help determine the right "fit" of the teacher and the school. Remember the School has a mission and a "culture." You may have to define it better but if you value it, you need to seek out teachers who can buy into it.

One personality inventory describes four leadership styles: 1. Amiable 2. Expressives. 3. Drivers and 4. Analyticals.

I have done substantial research on how these various styles succeed or fail in the head's role in independent schools.

1. "AMIABLES" tended to avoid conflict or confrontation and said yes to so many requests that over time the natural contradictions of telling everyone "yes" to problems that could not always be resolved with "yes" led to an erosion of confidence. But only over time.



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"Amiables" could run the school for several years before all these contradictions caught up with them, and the sword came down.

2. "EXPRESSIVES" were the extroverts, the glad handlers, the outgoing social types who were most comfortable with a sales mode. They too tended to avoid tough decisions and relied on building affinities, connections and friendship to achieve their goals and to protect themselves. This style works for a while, but can lead to long term problems.
3. "DRIVERS" were as the name implies "driven." These were the type A personalities that did not shirk decision making or controversy and waded right into the issues with their shirt sleeves rolled up. If they made it through the first three years, they might serve a long term. But many crash in the first three years by stirring up so many hornets' nests, the faculty are happy to see them go, quickly. Board members generally appreciate drivers a lot at first. And faculty tend to fear them immediately.
4. "ANALYTICALS" were the most successful heads. These individuals tended to weigh decisions cautiously but not indecisively. They were predictable without noticeable mood swings. They conveyed to the faculty a sense of a sound sturdy head at the helm of the ship. Nothing flashy here but reliable, thoughtful and constructive over time. "Analyticals" also seemed to have the best political sense of the art of the possible. They knew which issues to avoid and which ones to tackle and they had a keen sense of "timing." "Analyticals" tend to last longer in the job and to leave under their own steam.

While all heads are a combination of these styles, they tend to have a predominate style. This may seem simplistic but generally the patterns hold true.

4. **THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL CAPITAL:** This is crucial to ensuring a positive school climate. "Political capital" means the reservoir of good will that a head has built up with the faculty in the good times that can be drawn down upon safely in the difficult times. Representing the faculty's interests to the board, nurturing them, supporting them, fighting for their compensation needs, recognizing their talents, communicating with faculty on a personal level frequently, and defending them against unreasonable parent demands and complaints can all add to that reservoir of political capital. Expenditure of political capital occurs when the head makes a mistake, fires someone, acts suddenly or unilaterally, proceeds too rapidly with some change area or in any other way disappoints, hurts or angers the faculty. And if the reservoir is fairly low at the time, the head will need to count his days.
5. **ESTABLISHING 'BUFFER ZONES':** This is a key ingredient in keeping positive school morale. That means the head of the school must create buffers between himself and negative or potentially negative issues. Heads who always wear a target, always take on the burdens of



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others, always are willing to make the tough decisions, are being politically naive and often do not survive. Experienced heads realize that manipulation is not always bad. In fact it can be vital.

One head recently left a school after he personally counseled out a poor performing teacher. He had no back up from his department and division heads in the sense that they were not in the loop of this process as they should have been. It is the author's opinion that heads should never place themselves in the front lines of the teacher evaluation process. They will miss scheduled observations because of other pressures, and generally not be a consistent part of the evaluation loop.

This particular head lost his job one year after the teacher was fired because the teacher stirred up a hornet's nest with the community, faculty, parents, students and board. He claimed he had been "summarily dismissed." Because the head had not delegated the tough evaluation supervision to other administrators (so he could play good cop to their bad cop at the time of separation), he lost his community support and hence his job.

When a controversial new process or study is being undertaken, it is a good idea for the head to delegate the leadership of that process to the board or to have an outsider assist in the process of facilitating discussion of the change.

Managing all these areas is the creative act of good leadership. Each of these areas deserves more careful examination in all schools.

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