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NEW HEADS ARRIVING AND THE DANGERS AHEAD

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These are treacherous times for all schools and heads. However, they are even more challenging for those starting either a new head of school role or coming into a new school even as an experienced head.

The Transition Committee

This can be a crucial committee made up of key board members of the search committee. Often the search chair also chairs the transition committee though it could easily be the board chair. The committee has three goals:

1. Ensure the head's family settles in well, safely and that children are properly placed for their schooling and the spouse in his or her job opportunity
2. Ensure the type and pace of change is monitored carefully so as not to upset the faculty and staff
3. Ensure the head knows all the key players, incidents, history so as to avoid falling into a sink hole or making a critical error early on,

The Transition Committee meets for only one year, then disbands and does not attempt to micro manage the head.

The normal transition time for a head of school to establish him or her as the leader in charge and to have the choice to stay long term is five years. That is the average length of tenure as well of US independent school heads. The first year is supposed to be one of "lying low" building political capital, making no key decisions and avoid firing anyone. In other words every new head needs a honeymoon year. But will new heads this year have that luxury?

Head Agendas: Too Many and Too Soon

However, most heads new to a school will have a long agenda that they have set personally. And then the board also sets high expectations for a head in his or her first three years. Now with the coronavirus upon us and staying for a while, new heads will be expected to navigate dangerous financial waters; manage parent worries and expectations and faculty edginess about their own safety; and ensure the delivery of a quality, distance learning curriculum across all grade levels



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when necessary.

Building Political Capital

New heads are expected to learn the names of the students and parents; become familiar with the faculty culture and know something about the faculty and staff's families; and build strong political capital with the board and every single board member. This entry plan is a time consuming challenge as it is. Now any transition or entry plan will have to be modified for heads to be able to meet the changing safety and social distancing requirements of returning to the physical school site. New heads will have to consult with the board, administration and faculty and staff about key decisions that could affect their own career and the safety of students and the effectiveness of programs.

So the conundrum is: do not make any major changes in your first year, yet make the changes that are required for a safe return to schooling. Think of political capital as gas and the head needs a full tank of gas in order to retain the political capital that one needs as a head when making tough decisions. As that tank is drained (or perhaps it was never gassed up to begin with) the head is vulnerable, standing there with a target full of arrows on his or her back. Every decision a head makes is a potential arrow in that target or loss of gas. The head may end up functioning on fuel vapor which is unsustainable.

Building and rebuilding political capital is a time consuming task. It takes board support to make the head look good and the support of the administrative leaders to ensure that some portion of their own political capital is sent upwards to support the head's position. It is a two-way street. Those leaders will need that good will coming from the other way when their head is called upon to protect them.

Risk of Board Chair Turnover

If there is a change of board chair when the new head arrives and if the new chair is not the search chair that is a risk. If most members of the search committee do not plan to be around for the next three years, that is a big risk. If there is no transition committee to help the head navigate key personalities and potholes along the way, that is still another risk.

Case Study Example

New heads make the mistakes of inexperience. Often they are not given the opportunity to make up for early blunders. One Head called me this week to say he has been suddenly fired at the end of year 2 of a 5 year contract. The termination provision for "not for cause" dismissal is one full year of pay and benefits. That is the good news.



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The bad news is that in looking for a new job this Head will not have a base of operations, i.e. it will be obvious to all potential employers that the Head was dismissed. The Head claims not to know why he was terminated suddenly but does own the fact that in his first year he had to fire a popular yet unprofessional teacher, i.e., breaking one of the cardinal rules for of first-time heads or heads in their first year at a new school. That came back to haunt this Head.

This new Head got rumors of something going wrong when the Chair this spring (of all times!) asked for a 360 review which concerned the Head. There was no word for weeks until a few staff members and parents contacted the Head reporting they had received often late night calls asking for their opinion about the Head's performance, personality and stance on various topics.

When the Head received a note two weeks ago to meet with the Chair, the School's Attorney was present as well. Note that there was no Attorney there for the Head who was anxious but had no idea about the reason for the meeting.

This Head did not have a honeymoon period, neither a transition committee nor entry plan nor a loyal "fire in the belly" Chair. This type of chair can be both direct with the head about his/her defensiveness when criticized and yet is also firm with board members who break ranks and engage with parents in conversations that undercut the head.

Remember the Patterns and Statistics

Based on Littleford & Associates' experience, board turnover, chair turnover and the loss of institutional memory account for 60% of the cases of heads being "fired". Another important and related statistic is that is the third or fourth chair who fires the head 80% of the time.

However, about 30% of the time heads are fired because they make too many changes that are threatening to faculty too quickly before they build that reservoir of political capital. That results often in teachers making an end run to the parents or board members directly to complain about the head. Missteps made early on are often impossible to correct. With the virus driving feelings, passions and decisions, all heads are at risk but new heads are especially vulnerable, and if they do not survive, there will be a new expensive search, another transition, and a loss of at least two to three years of momentum and progress.

Now more than ever, boards need an entry plan for the new head, a transition committee to ease the way and a reminder that the transition for a head of school is five years, usually not three years and definitely NOT one year. If heads survive five years they have better than an 80% chance of being a long term head at that school if they wish.

Act now to create an entry plan and form a transition committee with clear tasks for one year only.



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Prepare yourselves as a board for needing to provide the head with appropriate feedback and to stand tall to support the head when the arrows begin to fly.