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NURTURING YOUR HEAD: A FIVE-POINT PARADIGM

Posted on September 23, 2020

High head turnover usually results from fallout with boards, which in turn is often due to the loss of institutional memory on boards. Aside from these normally dangerous patterns, the challenge of delivering a high-quality academic program during the Pandemic is compounding risks for heads of independent and international schools. Some boards are so focused now on short-term, unforeseen crises that they are inadvertently overlooking nurturing their heads of school. This means ensuring that their needs and that of their families are met and encouraging them to keep their spirits up and remain on the job. One Head of School recently told me that he has not had a day off since March and that while his Board supports him, he does not feel cared for. “Support” and “nurturing” are not the same.

I. Board Chair and Board Member Courage

Heads need to know that their board chair and perhaps one or two other key players on the board are there as a backstop to protect them. The board needs to build a “firewall” between the head and the constituents, and the board and the constituents. This does not mean that there is no communication or that there is no transparency. An appropriate amount of both is especially important now when the school community is anxious and stressed. It means that the board must not allow “end-runs” around the board or the head such as meetings of “concerned” faculty and staff or parents with the head not present; meetings or sidebar communications between board members and administrators, faculty, staff or parents; or a “town meeting” in response to disgruntled stakeholders. Not allowing these behaviors demonstrates the courage to stand up to challenging times and groups to defend the head.

Remember when confronted with a crisis a board should circle the wagons; “shut up” and support your head. This sounds harsh but it means: unite as a board; do not talk outside the board room; and direct complaints from faculty, staff, parents, alumni, etc. to the head or the appropriate administrator. In other words, do not “throw your head of school under the bus”.



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II. Competitive Compensation

Heads of independent and independent schools need to be compensated competitively and fairly and boards need to know about market replacement costs. Despite the tightness of budgets now, this is not the time to cut back on head compensation and benefits. The job of head of school is riskier than ever. Heads are dealing with decisions that threaten the health and safety of the community, and they are more subject to blame and potential liability and lawsuits than ever before. In addition, heads, together with their boards, need to be crafting DEI policies and sensitive and proper responses to BLM. Boards get what they pay for.

III. The Head's Family

Heads need to know that their spouses, partners and children are cared for and are not enduring personal attacks from stakeholders who may be angry because of a current or past decisions or the need to reverse course. If boards cannot protect the heads' families, if boards cannot provide a barrier from heads being attacked personally in ways that would hurt their families, then the board is not doing its job.

IV. Mission Fit

Heads need to know that as boards redefine, or rebrand or possibly reshape a school based upon changing demographics or a changing marketplace that they have a crucial role to play in this discussion.

V. Time Off

Heads need to know that they can get a break, take a sabbatical, take a vacation or just get some relief from the stress for them and their families. They need to know that professional development opportunities for strengthening their careers are on the horizon and not too far away. They need to grow, learn and recharge.

VI. Conclusion

Boards have three jobs: ensuring mission integrity; providing fiscal oversight; and hiring, guiding



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and firing the head. The model for independent and international schools is the hourglass. At the top is the board, the head's boss; at the bottom are all stakeholders; in the middle is the head. If you bypass the middle or allow others to do so, in effect, permitting "end runs", you are breaking the model. During these Covid-19 times that model is being stressed as never before.

Great boards have long term members who work with long term chairs who support long term heads who leave powerful legacies. Short term and short sighted boards with short term chairs lead to short term heads and no legacy but rather constant change, transition and loss of reputation and financial stability.