



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

POWERFUL ELEMENTS OF THE HEAD SEARCH PROCESS: THE RISKS OF TRANSITIONS

Posted on August 1, 2015

Among the key ingredients to a successful search and a smooth transition of leadership are:

- Avoiding the natural "trap" of choosing a new head who is the polar opposite of the preceding head in style and personality.
- Understanding how school culture and the circumstances of the prior head's departure may affect subtly the search outcome in positive and negative ways
- Managing the expectations of all constituents who have direct or indirect input into the selection of the new head
- Keeping the candidate "pool" engaged and the search committee open to "thinking outside of the box" right up until the final selection
- Devoting MORE time to identifying, anticipating and managing transition issues than to the search process itself. WHY?
- Mentoring new heads on the importance of assessing school climate; managing the pace of change; and building key board and constituent coalitions. Who shares in this important responsibility?
- Designing an appropriate and competitive compensation package that adequately meets the needs of the new head's family and the school while taking into account the culture of the community and media attention.

A skilled search consultant serves as an advisor to the search committee, the board and also to the incoming head, when necessary. Training search committee members in how to manage a search process is crucial to success. Training them as well in how to handle transition questions, how to probe references, how to operate as interview teams, and how to make the most of the school's scarce search budget in attracting candidates and bringing them to visit informally is a hallmark of the search and transition services offered by Littleford & Associates.

1. The Search

1. Circumstances of the Head's Departure

In independent schools the opportunity to launch a search process takes on a life of its



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

own. The process and outcome depend first upon the circumstances of the prior head's departure and his or her legacy. In the case of a retiring long-term head, the school community becomes quickly consumed by the attitude, "the king is dead, long live the king!" in the early stages. This is human nature, of course. The successful outgoing head may feel somewhat discomfited by how quickly he or she seems to be relegated to the past even though accomplishments are praised.

In the case of a head who has been "fired", i.e., the contract has not been renewed, the departing head may feel relief, disappointment or anger depending on whether he was "prepared" or blindsided. The reaction of parents, teachers and alumni, who may be misinformed or not fully informed about the decision, can affect and possibly undermine the search and transition dynamic and make it almost impossible for a new head to succeed. The Search Committee and constituents may set up the new head for a very difficult transition especially if too much overt or subtle criticism is directed at the prior head by either the board or the new head.

In one school, the head accepted the Board's decision not to renew with reluctance and disappointment. In subsequent months, alumni and parents sought to have the head reinstated while the search for a successor had already been launched. The head, feeling naturally buoyed by this outpouring of support, did not discourage their efforts. A new head has been selected with the backing of the full board, but he faces a difficult entry and transition period.

Search committees tend to recommend and board choose a replacement who is often the polar opposite personality and style of the predecessor. Normally, the longer the previous head was in place, the more opposite the personality of the successor. This pendulum swing can be averted by the guidance of a search firm that understands typical patterns of behavior of search committees and encourages a balanced outlook.

2. Trustee Patterns of Behavior

Searches can be exciting. Opportunities to recruit applicants, interview them and speak to references are a new and empowering experience for many trustees. Most search committees and boards recognize the seriousness of this responsibility, but trustee behavior influences the result of the search process. If a search committee/board cannot articulate and agree upon its needs and priorities, finding the appropriate leader will be difficult. If trustees tend to micromanage, they may not be attracted to the visionary head whom the school needs. If they do not truly appreciate the difficulties and stresses of the job of head of school, they may underestimate the breadth and depth of



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

skills required. If they take an overly "CEO approach", they may miss the importance of the "student head".

Candidates visit, stir up excitement or indifference, and usually generate support among some constituent groups, but seldom all. The "faculty" candidate may not be the "board" candidate who may not be the "parent" or "alumni" favorite among the choices available. Sometimes, but rarely do all elements rally around a single candidate.

At all times, a good search firm manages expectations because the "ideal" candidate possessing ALL of the characteristics needed and/or desired in a new leader may not exist. The candidate pool is a fluid mix: "leading" contenders may drop out or unexpectedly disappoint, or a young, ambitious senior administrator may seem like a breath of fresh air and take everyone by surprise. One of the roles of the search consultant is to keep the committee open to and excited by the changing mix and to create interest on the part of heads who may not necessarily be in the market. It is important to keep the "pool" viable and not let the search committee become too assured too early about a single candidate.

2. The Compensation Component: Transition Warnings

An experienced head was recently appointed to a new school headship. The prior head of school lived in his own home purchased when housing was readily affordable. The Board learned that it could not recruit nationally a candidate of quality without providing school housing. Once the candidate was chosen, rumors begin to circulate among parents and faculty about the cost of the home for the new head.

Even before he arrived, the new head took a direct "hit" for the new house. The community assumed that the HEAD insisted on this purchase. This policy decision to buy a head's home should have been announced at the beginning of the search. It should have been communicated that the home would be a valuable school asset and that in many schools, living in school-owned housing is a condition of employment. Any flak would have been deflected from the new head.

In another case, a veteran school head had just been offered a new position. The Search Committee and Board Chair were both surprised when it was time to negotiate the package. At various points in the search process, the compensation expectations of the newly chosen head were conveyed to the Search Chair but not to the Board Chair, who thought the package might be modest initially until the school's finances improved. The search firm had assured the candidate that the offer would be very competitive and similar to his current package. These miscommunications caused both parties to feel uncertain about the discussions. The



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

successful outcome was not without some tense moments that might have potentially damaged future relations among all parties. The expectations of the parties had been quite different and "assumed" or underestimated until the final stages. It is important that the search consultant keep all parties on the same page throughout the process.

Occasionally, the compensation expectations of the candidate of choice may be unrealistic or inappropriate. Buoyed by his status as the finalist, a newly invited head of a very prestigious well-endowed school put forth an aggressive compensation proposal. In this case, the consultant hired by the board to facilitate the negotiations needed to advise against an overly aggressive starting package, despite enthusiasm on both sides about the selection.

Political sensitivity was the key in this situation. The outgoing popular head's salary was comparable to the proposed new salary, and that head was feeling "cast aside". Total compensation must be benchmarked relative to the market, but the Board must be aware of the feelings of the departing head as well as building upside potential and incentives into the new head's package. The final offer contained strong future incentives to offset a lower starting point.

Once the new head has been chosen, the compensation decision is an opportunity to build upon the goodwill that has been created and to design the evaluation process and reward components, if comfortable for both parties. This happens IF a search consultant with experience in the independent school world has knowledge of the various components of compensation packages. The firm informs the search committee in advance what it MAY take to land the candidate of its choice. Thus, the groundwork can be laid to avert any surprises that may undermine the selection of a new head or the acceptance of an offer. Littleford & Associates works for the boards of schools either when the firm is engaged as the search consultant, or when the firm is retained only at the closing compensation phase.

3. Transition Issues Begin Immediately

Most search committees and boards pay little attention to the aftermath of the selection of a new head. These are the "transition" issues. And they are HUGE. Many heads are "fired", the vast majority in their first five years and the majority of those in their third year. Search committees need to spend as much or MORE time and attention in planning for the successful transition (which takes three to five years), as it does for the search itself.

This time, attention and energy needed for transition issues seldom takes place. The board and search committee naturally want to celebrate and move on. Yet the work is actually just beginning. In addition, it may be a good idea for a trustee to oversee the smooth departure of the outgoing head and to ensure that her accomplishments are appropriately celebrated. How



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

the departing head feels and how she may convey those feelings to the community can affect the new head.

Transition issues inevitably surface regardless of the new head's experience and often trip up the head and the board. Littleford & Associates is currently conducting searches and advising schools where transition issues are being explored and planned for as part of the PRE-search phase. These include clarity about compensation expectations of talented heads, workshops for the board on preparing for the search but also preparing for the transition and spotting the transition issues. These need to be tracked for a three year period.

Experienced heads, while highly desired for the arrows in their "quiver" tend to fall into the trap of moving too quickly to carry out a search committee's charge to make key changes in school life. Those often involve changes regarding faculty quality, evaluation procedures, accountability, parent relationships, financial controls, expanding marketing efforts etc.

One experienced head, who followed a beloved longstanding leader, was given the mandate to make administrative changes, institute a new salary and teacher evaluation system, dust off the strategic plan, undertake master facilities planning and examine curriculum and schedule to name a few. These changes were acknowledged as being needed and/or desired, yet each one was met with resistance at some point from one or more constituent groups. Five years later, while the school finds itself in good shape, the climate remains unsettled. This head may ultimately represent the "sacrificial lamb" or the "middle man" who paved the way for the next leader who may serve a longer term.

Heads new to the job make the mistake of not playing the role of the observer and listener for an appropriate length of time while simultaneously developing political capital. Interestingly, experienced heads should understand this rule and they think they do. They make the same mistakes. They just do it in a more sophisticated manner.

If the former head's legacy is not elevated but criticized excessively or unkindly, the new head forms an unfavorable first impression about how he will be viewed or evaluated. An annual evaluation process is essential, with the head's performance being measured against a manageable agreed upon set of goals. Personal "style points", should not enter into the process.

In addition, the head's personal life must not be overlooked. If he or she has a spouse or family, their adjustment and happiness are directly related to that of the Head, who may not air these concerns openly but may be dealing with such issues regularly at home.

In one international school, the spouse of an experienced head was left to deal alone with the



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

bureaucracy and regulations unique to that country. She was also feeling the loss of a role she had enjoyed and in which she had felt valued and affirmed in the former school. The family was incurring living expenses which they had expected to be covered. These issues were allowed to simmer beneath the surface and created stress for the Head until the Board was made aware of them and put appropriate support mechanisms in place. The partnership was close to dissolving.

4. The Importance of Assessing School Climate

School climate and change issues are a major area of activity for Littleford & Associates. Our firm has been engaged by an increasing number of schools worldwide where either experienced or school heads new to a school are struggling with board factions, splits, and indecision over whether to back a head when an incident or series of actions stirs controversy among the communities served by the School.

These changes in school culture may be related to the consistency of discipline being applied, including some where the children of board members are involved. Some parents want tough standards and others want "compassion" and flexibility. The new head may not yet know the culture well enough to avoid the political pitfalls and warning signals.

Recently, in one client school, students were caught smoking marijuana near school, and another group was caught during a school trip. The new head dealt with each case firmly and on an individual basis depending upon the circumstances of the offense. The story appeared in the local press. Several parents questioned the severity of the disciplinary actions and ultimately the leadership of the School. The Board sought counsel on how to manage this problem from both a PR and governance/transition perspective. The final press coverage was a boon to the school.

Other change issues center on curriculum, the departure of faculty, tightening up of student and faculty standards and codes of conduct, or perhaps control of an athletic program that may be out of "sync" with the stated culture of the school. ALL these issues are change issues that are a natural part of transitioning to a new head, but those involving faculty are particularly risky if the new head was not the faculty's first choice.

Transition issues become crises depending on how a board reacts. The smallest incident can cause a crisis in an unhealthy board. The biggest crisis can become an opportunity for strengthening a school where there is a healthy board. The boards most at risk are often those that are so self assured about their governance practices and perhaps so strong in endowment, admissions and reputation, that their assurance may not allow them to see or be prepared for the constituent attack.



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
— GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS —

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

Parking lot gossip is a fact of life in most independent schools. When board members (including their spouses) also engage in this behavior, or when they fail to speak in one voice outside of the board room, the head is even more vulnerable.

Transition issues are managed best when the partnership between head and chair is very strong. In this case the head and chair both understand the need to build political good will to other key board allies first, and then to influential figures in the faculty, and the parent body. Most boards falter when the head/chair partnership is cracking or not working well enough. However, a significant minority of boards fail in their roles when the chair/head partnership is viewed as too close by the rest of the board, and the head is not seen as receiving appropriate feedback and criticism.

Transition issues can exacerbate tensions that are already present at the board level and in the culture of the school.

While a board may not wish to form a "transition committee" following a successful search, all boards should study and explore transition issues AS PART OF THE SEARCH PROCESS. They should ask key individuals from the search committee to remain closely engaged with the new head. The goal is to ensure that the head has the appropriate guidance and support in understanding school culture and politics and to ensure a successful healthy transition for the head AND his or her family. The goal is NOT to let the new head step into a highly charged political issue unknowingly or not to back that head fully when an issue may arise.

Newly appointed heads often seek guidance from Littleford & Associates relating to key issues and the politics of their boards surrounding these issues. Most often it is a negative faculty reaction to the head's style or decisions that have undermined the head with the board. Often the head is acting under specific or assumed board direction to address certain problems.

Mentoring heads new to the role as part of a transition process is crucial. All of the energy expended in finding a new head is wasted unless the new head receives appropriate mentoring for THIS PARTICULAR SCHOOL'S ISSUES. In this regard, it is often a good idea to have an outside support system for the head, and sometimes, self and team diagnostic tools such as the Myers-Briggs assessment can be helpful.

There is a major proviso to this last recommendation. Many board members with corporate experience suggest corporate counseling strategies, evaluation methods (OMB or "360"), corporate consultants and HR solutions in independent school settings. Corporate objectives and governance structures are different than those of independent schools. Some HR approaches transfer well; others while well intentioned, often trip up a school head and



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

contribute to failure.

Establishing concrete ways to help, support, guide and keep the new head and to ensure school stability thereby is a hallmark of Littleford and Associates. Finding and mentoring heads, as well as conducting search and transition workshops to provide for long term healthy governance, are part of the many areas of our Firm's expertise.

John Littleford
Senior Partner