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THE SEARCH...THE TRANSITION... AND THEN THE SUCCESSION

Posted on May 13, 2017

Introduction

Too often boards (and heads) focus on the excitement and challenge of the search process, and very few boards pay much attention at all to honoring the outgoing head or think much beyond the actual landing of the new head. However, there are three distinct phases of a head search and all three require equal attention. The compendium of articles that follow describe the crucial steps and aspects of the search process: before, during and after.

I. The Search

The first steps are to select a search consultant who has a deep knowledge of the client's unique school culture and to form a search committee of wise and carefully selected members. The search itself may encounter several potential pitfalls such as the inclusion of an internal candidate, managing the candidate pool skillfully and handling the many expectations of various constituents, to name a few.

II. The Transition

This is the point at which the energy of the search committee and that of the board typically begins to flag. We have written a great deal about transition but most search committees pay little attention to this crucial second stage of the search process.

All searches should plan for a "transition" committee made up of 3 to 4 board members who were also on the search committee. This committee should guide the chosen head during the last year of the present head's tenure and through the first year or two of the new head's tenure. The committee's main purpose is to care for the needs of the new head and family; help the new head to avoid early significant mistakes; help the new head to understand which individuals and stakeholders deserve attention immediately; and identify the individuals and issues that should not be tackled early on.

The transition includes establishing or reinforcing the rules of engagement for healthy boards and



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defining upfront a clear and supportive head evaluation process.

III. The Succession

Succession refers to the ability of the new head to make a successful long term commitment to the school and to the role of the board in retaining and nurturing the head in order to assist in achieving that outcome.

"Succession" is the long game while "transition" is the short game, but all three phases: search, transition and succession, have clear rules of the road. Otherwise the head leaves or is fired and the process starts all over again.

We hope that you enjoy this body of articles devoted to this critical time in the life of an independent or international school. We suggest that you keep them handy for reference because there will come a time sooner rather than later when the information and recommendations will be highly relevant. Littleford & Associates can provide assistance at any point during these three phases of the search process.

THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF A SUCCESSFUL SEARCH: ADVICE FOR BOARDS AND HEADS

I. Choosing a Search Consultant

Most independent school trustees view a head search as the most important and time consuming task that they will ever undertake in that role. In fact it is an honor and privilege for many trustees to be invited to serve on a search committee. Therefore, these committee members need to have a rapport with and trust in their chosen search consultant in order to achieve the outcome that is best for the school, and frankly, which reflects positively in turn upon them.

If the search process does not land the preferred candidate and one with staying power because he or she does not mesh with the school culture, no one wins. Or if the contract negotiation process either is not professionally handled or leaves unspoken but lingering bad feelings, there is a carryover to the relationship between the new head and the board that threatens the chances for a long-term successful headship.

In selecting a search consultant to find a head of school (or CEO for a nonprofit), the determining factor is usually the chemistry of the consultant with the board chair, search committee chair and/or others on the committee. What is probably most important, however, in that selection is the consultant's existing knowledge (or knowledge that he or she works diligently to obtain) about the school's culture, mission, history and the political realities that may be landmines for the next head or CEO.



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Rarely done but a very good idea is to choose a search consultant who is already familiar with the school from other work or assignments and may be very well positioned to know the type of head candidates who are most likely to succeed in that school culture and meet the expectations of the board and staff. Contrary to popular belief it is a plus, not a drawback, for the search consultant to know most of the client school's "warts" and skeletons in its closet.

While the search consultant does not always have intimate knowledge of school and organizational climate, on site work prior to the start of the search is crucial to gaining that knowledge and insight. It should include focus group meetings with the parents, faculty, staff, students and alumni. The consultant will not receive sufficient insights simply by posting a standard online questionnaire on the school's website to gather constituent input about the qualities most sought in a new head or the challenges that he or she is likely to face.

Search committees, with the advice of their consultant, typically begin the process by developing a profile of traits and experience most desired in a new head. However, often that profile is cast aside as the personal chemistry of one "star" candidate captures the imagination of the committee. The charisma factor then outweighs all others.

At that point, the search consultant needs to have enough knowledge about the committee members and the board as a whole to offer appropriate warnings and guidance. The consultant especially needs to know about the school's faculty and staff culture and the history, incidents and tensions that are a crucial part of it, and how they are likely to mesh (or not) with the emerging frontrunner.

II. Forming the Search Committee

While transparency may demand that a search committee have one or more teachers, parents, or alumni (who are not already on the board), Board members, especially experienced ones, understand the challenges and delicacies of the search while non board members (unless very well trained at the outset) tend not to. We are advocates of having most, if not all, members of the actual search committee be board members as the board is charged with governance and the ultimate selection of the next Head.

The most effective searches that usually land the candidate of first choice do sacrifice some democracy and some transparency. It is risky to allow too many people who have no training in basic board governance to have input and a role.

All committee members have private agendas at some level as each seeks a trait or experience in a new head that reflects his or her own definition of the mission. However, some members may have an inappropriate motive such as wanting to hire a head who might fix a narrow parental based



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issue.

In one search the faculty member on the search committee preferred another candidate but went along with the majority when it was clear that her candidate would not receive the "nod." But two years later when this new Head initiated some unpopular changes this same teacher let it be known to the faculty that the Head had not been the "faculty candidate" in the first place. She also gave the impression that the new Head was having problems because he was the Board's or the parents' candidate who was unsympathetic to faculty concerns. The faculty representative (although it could have been a parent or alumni rep(s) as well) was waiting for the new Head to slip on the first banana peel.

Search advisory committees composed of a cross-section of parents and faculty can always be used during the semifinalist and/or finalist stages to interview the candidates on site and make their feedback known to the board search committee. They provide feedback only: they do not vote.

III. Inside Candidates

One of the first challenges facing many a search is how to deal with internal candidates. Some search committees believe it is wise to ask one or more insiders to throw their hat into the ring. The old adage "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't" has some merit, and inside candidates have the added advantage of needing relatively little time to adjust to their new role while outsiders need at least three years to do so.

On the other hand, insiders may have little or no realistic chance of success. Why? The "warts" of the insider are only too well-known and boards seem to want "fresh blood" not afraid of instituting change and upsetting the school culture. A risk to the school is that if the insider's run is destined to fail, the school will be left to manage that individual's disappointment and disgruntlement. In the worst case, the bypassed insider could undercut the new head with teachers or parents.

Sometimes there is one strong inside candidate whom the board really wants to appoint but it feels that it must undergo a search in order to satisfy the community; engage in a transparent process; and grant legitimacy to that individual. Such a search normally discourages the best external contenders who see the handwriting on the wall early on. But what if some new information or a new development makes the leading internal candidate suddenly less attractive? Then there may be only a small pool of desirable outsiders to whom the school can turn.

One School had a strong Assistant Head who had been waiting in the wings for some time. This Consultant conducted focus groups with a cross-section of key constituents on school climate and quickly reached the conclusion that this individual was highly respected and would be embraced widely as the new Head of School. The wise Board moved quickly to appoint him. He has enjoyed a



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relatively seamless transition; he has a healthy relationship with the Board; he is executing the mission according to the strategic plan; AND the School saved all of the expense of a full-blown search.

Thoughts:

1. Encourage only the strongest "inside hopefuls" and convey your decision early on. Give a consistent clear message to the school community about that decision.
2. Do not appoint the inside candidate as an Interim or Acting Head. That will drive away savvy, qualified outside candidates who view the insider as having an unfair advantage.
3. Make a complete informed and objective assessment of whether the insider fits your profile and whether a search is really necessary for the optics.

IV. Search Committee Patterns of Behavior

Most search committees want an educational visionary with strong people skills, a pied piper with students, a fund raiser with the ability to pull in six-seven figure gifts, an astute financial manager, and an enrollment and marketing genius. They will find it easy to embrace someone who loves sports, has bright well-behaved children, a selfless charming spouse or partner and impressive academic credentials. He or she should also be a prodigious worker whose door is always open. In other words, everyone wants "God on a good day."

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 probably does 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 candidate 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 excited too early about a single candidate.

Search committees tend to recommend and boards tend to choose a replacement who often has 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. The guidance of a search firm that understands typical patterns of search committee behavior and encourages a balanced outlook can help to avoid a pendulum swing effect.

Opportunities to recruit and interview applicants and speak to referees 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



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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 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.

Thoughts:

1. There is no perfect candidate. The best leaders know how to build a strong team which buffers and complements his or her weaknesses. Certain skills can be bought from experts in the marketplace. Be open to but not bowled over by chemistry.
2. Most heads are former teachers. Most teachers are care givers and not risk takers. Thus, heads tend to be risk averse. The more analytical the head, the less charismatic he or she may seem. BUT the more successful he or she may be long term for not having made decisions that affect the culture too quickly.
3. Avoid the trap of choosing a leader repeatedly with a polar opposite style and personality from the preceding head. It results in too much instability for the school in the long run.

V. Search Strategies

Appointing an interim head is a good option when there is insufficient time to conduct a full national search; when the prior head leaves suddenly; when the community needs some healing; or for example, when the prior head was a pied piper leader much beloved by all. Be sure, however, that all parties and constituents are clear about the interim's future at the school.

In an external search, it is imperative that three to five candidates remain engaged in the semifinalist stage and two finalists be kept in the loop until the first choice person agrees formally. On the other hand, continuing to look too long for the "right" candidate may lead to an aborted search. Misleading a candidate to the extent that he or she jeopardizes his or her current position gives the school a bad name.

VI. Healthy Board Governance

All searches result in an unhappy outcome if the board does not have an effective chair and a well-



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trained board who understand and apply the principles of good practice. Trustees who speak out of turn, gossip, criticize the previous head or exhibit micromanaging behavior send the message that they are an unprofessional board that would worry any head.

Handling reference checking with complete confidentiality and diplomacy, especially where sitting heads whose interest is not known to his or her current school are involved, is of paramount importance.

Boundaries and channels must be observed at all times. There can be no side bar conversations between the search committee and other constituent groups, including other board members, unless a formal structure of advisory committees is set up and the rules for their communication with the candidates and the search committee are very clear and followed explicitly.

Thoughts:

1. Train ALL search and advisory committee members, with the help of the search consultant, on appropriate questions and behavior towards candidates. Search committees who appear to have handed over the process to one or more vocal constituent groups often lose their first choice candidates and either settle or start the search again.
2. The professionalism of these committees reflects upon the school and is the first voice that the candidate hears. The committee(s) must sell as well as screen.
3. The partnership of the chair and new head is forged in the process of the search. It is always preferred that the search chair and the board chair stay on for at least one year after the new head is hired.

VII. Compensation Issues

Once the new head has been chosen, the compensation decision is an opportunity to build upon goodwill. This happens IF a search consultant with experience in the independent school world has knowledge of the various components of a compensation package. The firm informs the search committee in advance what it MAY take to land the candidate of its choice. Littleford & Associates works for 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.

Aside from an intimate understanding of school culture and history and board and faculty politics, the search consultant needs an in depth knowledge of all of the following: the candidate's current compensation package; overall financial health and family circumstances; as well as the financial condition of the school; total compensation paid to the current head; the attitude of the board towards compensation and its willingness to be flexible and creative.



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Only one person, usually the search committee or board chair, works with the consultant in negotiating the package to be offered to the finalist. The search consultant needs to know the hot buttons or deal breakers for both parties, and their respective negotiating styles.

Sometimes the finalist raises the ante by asking for pay or benefits that were not on the table as part of the initial compensation conversation with the search consultant or the search chair. These could be totally fair and OR the requests could indicate a future pattern of behavior of the head of conveying one sentiment and then changing course unexpectedly. The chair may grant these requests in order to close the deal, but an underlying resentment about that may linger, and the new head may be under more pressure to perform.

Thoughts:

1. Ensure that your search consultant is skilled in negotiating the complete compensation package OR seek an outside experienced facilitator to bring quick closure to the process. The more protracted the negotiations, the greater is the potential for damage to the relationship between the new head and those who have been entrusted with the responsibility of reaching an agreement.
2. The candidate should communicate openly with the search consultant and chair about which issues are negotiable and which are not.

VIII. Treat the Departing Head Respectfully

"The king is dead" refers to the departing head. While the departing head usually knows his proper place in the search process, he/she is concerned about his legacy and may be anxious about the next career move. Treat him or her professionally and with gratitude and respect assuming that the separation did not result from egregious behavior. Plan a celebration of his/her accomplishments. Invite him/her back to the school for very important events.

Remember that the new head will be watching how the departing head is treated as a sign of the treatment that he or she can expect to receive.

IX. Conclusion

The key steps in the process are simple:

1. Hire the right search firm.
2. Establish an appropriate timetable, typically eighteen months and no longer.
3. Develop an accurate, realistic and enticing profile.
4. Form the search committee and establish the rules of the game for all players.



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5. Outline the communications strategies.
6. Treat all candidates with respect.
7. Ensure you do not lose strong candidates by dragging out the process or by not being up front, professional and fair with all.
8. Sell all comers on the reasons why they should want to head your school.
9. Ensure a successful and smooth transition by making transition a priority.

The Risks of Transitions

I. The Transition Committee

Most search committees and boards pay little attention to the aftermath of the selection of a new head. These are the transition issues. They are huge and they begin immediately. Search committees need to spend as much or more time in planning for the successful transition (which takes three to five years), as it does for the search itself. Most heads encounter serious transition issues within the first one to three years, and the majority will not succeed or remain in the new position beyond five years. While some may consider a five year stint to be a reasonable tenure, it is not long enough to leave a lasting impact or legacy.

1. There should be a transition committee which is small, confidential and composed of wise highly respected board members. Its key role is to ensure that the head does not fall into traps or cross powerful and important constituents.
2. The transition committee also helps to ensure a smooth transition for the head's family including the physical move, school placement and the role of the spouse.
3. The transition committee needs to remain in place for at least a year, and perhaps for up to two years beyond the welcoming, honeymoon phase.
4. The committee should not micromanage the head or be intrusive.

If a board does not wish to form a formal transition committee, it should at least ask key individuals from the search committee to remain closely engaged with the new head. They are to help the new head understand school culture and politics and to help him or her avoid stepping into a highly charged political issue unknowingly. Another goal is to make sure that the entire family adapts well to their new situation.

Most boards do not hold a governance workshop with a focus on transition with the new head or CEO present. This is an invaluable part of Littleford & Associates' search services

II. Managing the Pace of Change and Building Key Board and Constituent Coalitions

Experienced heads, while highly desired for the arrows in their quiver, tend to fall into the trap of



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moving too quickly to carry out a search committee's charge to make key changes. Those often involve changes regarding faculty quality, evaluation procedures, accountability, parent relationships, financial controls, expanding marketing efforts, etc. Changes involving faculty are particularly risky if the new head was not the faculty's first choice. All searches that result in the selection of outsiders cause some loss of momentum for the school initially. The key is PATIENCE.

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 quality. These changes were needed and/ or desired, but they were undertaken in rapid fire succession. Thus, each one was met with resistance at some point from one or more constituent groups. This head ultimately represented the "sacrificial lamb" or the middle man who paved the way for the next leader who served 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.

III. The Importance of Healthy Board Governance

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 their endowment, admissions and reputation, that their confidence may not allow them to see or be prepared for the constituent attack.

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.



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IV. Mentorina

Mentoring both new and experienced heads 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.

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, governance structures and culture are different than those of independent schools. Some HR approaches transfer well; others while well intentioned, often trip up a school head and contribute to failure.

V. The Head Support and Evaluation Committee

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. The head support and evaluation committee conducts an annual evaluation process with the head's performance being measured against a manageable, previously agreed upon set of goals, preferably no more than five or six. Personal "style points", should not enter into the process. And again, a 360 approach is NOT recommended.

VI. Family Support

Never overlook the head's personal life. If he or she has a spouse, partner 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 bureaucracy and regulations unique to that country. She was also feeling the loss of a role that 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.

It is generally a huge plus if the spouse or partner is able to find a good job locally, assuming that he or she wants one, if or the school has a desirable position for him or her. On the other hand, some schools expect the spouse or partner (male or female) to donate time and effort by helping to host events, entertain, and be a presence in the life of the school in some major ways. Boards need to be clear about their expectations of the spouse or partner and to thank and praise appropriately his or



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her good works on a regular and timely basis. Some schools (usually boarding schools) may even pay the spouse or partner a modest salary for performing these roles.

Just as an unhappy and unfulfilled partner may cause a fine school head to leave prematurely, if a head's child is unable to fit in socially or academically the same outcome may occur. Most head candidates will not, and should not even consider seriously an offer unless the educational choices for their school age children meet their various needs. On the other hand, if the inability of the school (or alternative local schools) to meet a child's needs satisfactorily becomes obvious, it is best to be upfront as soon as possible in the search so both parties can pursue other options.

Many schools provide a school-owned home and require the head to live in it as a condition of employment. Boards need to pay attention to the condition of the home and whether its features are meeting the family's needs. They often overlook this because the home is considered a benefit. If the school does not provide a home, the board must ensure that the head receives adequate housing support annually.

VII. The Contract

Remember that heads frequently are former teachers. Thus, like teachers, they are often not motivated by money. Nevertheless, heads are turned off by a package that does not reflect their worth in the marketplace. It is usually easier for a head to leave in order to raise his/her package than it is to stay and try to negotiate with a board who makes the head feel "captured" and having little political capital.

This brings us to the final phase of the search...

You've Hired the "Perfect" Head-Now What?

Many boards spend a great deal of time designing the new head's entry level package and then in subsequent years pay very little attention to it. Many self-effacing heads are uncomfortable raising the "money issue" for fear of appearing overly aggressive, but if the annual compensation review is either overlooked or sloppy, the head's resentment quietly builds. Boards need to focus not only on how much the head is paid but also upon several components of the total package and benchmark each relative to the local, regional and even national market. In addition, the head's needs and that of his or her family change over time and the compensation package may need to become more creative in order to provide for those needs and to provide incentives for future performance and/or retention.

The compensation committee may be the same as the head support and evaluation committee or it may be the executive committee, for example. In any case, compensation committees should have a



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charter of their purpose or resolution. This can be short but should state clearly the authority that the board has devolved upon this committee to act on its behalf and to employ an independent compensation consultant if desired and deemed necessary.

The compensation committee should be "squeaky clean" in order to comply with IRS requirements AND to avoid being a target for disgruntled constituents. The participation of person(s) with a real or perceived conflict of interest in the determination of the head's compensation package could represent serious ammunition for parents, alumni or faculty seeking to air grievances.

A conflict of interest may exist at two levels:

1. Individuals on the board who derive special benefits as vendors or friends of the school. These include vendors/trustees paid to do architectural, construction or landscaping work, or provide auditing, consulting, legal or search services or any other kind of activities for a fee. This relates to the vendor AND to the firm of which the vendor may be a member or employee.
2. Individuals without financial conflicts of interest but who have a personal relationship with the head as close friends, relatives or employees.

While acknowledging the increased emphasis upon transparency with respect to CEO/head compensation packages, there is always the risk of politicizing the process by making it TOO public and a political football at a board meeting. Some boards may be plagued by a lack of confidentiality, and information may find itself in the hands of employees, parents and alumni.

While head compensation (but not all components of it) of non-religiously associated nonprofits will be published on the 990 forms (albeit two years later on [Guidestar.org](https://www.guidestar.org)) inappropriate board approaches can make the topic even more politically sensitive. Hence professional counsel, while not legally required, is often advisable.

If a board does not conduct an annual and professional review of the head's total compensation and appropriately evaluate and reward his or her performance, it is jeopardizing the head's long-term ability to deliver on all aspects of "succession": mission clarity, strategic planning, effective fund raising and endowment building, facilities development and mission based faculty recruitment and retention.