



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 GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: TIME TO RENEW THE HEAD'S CONTRACT: WELL, NOT SO FAST

Posted on April 7, 2021

What are the best practice protocols for determining whether or not to renew the contract of a sitting head of school? What is the role of the chair? The board as a whole? The head? What is the best timing and what are the pitfalls of this conversation?

A surprisingly frequent problem, reflected in this note from a Board Member, prompted this article:

“Dear John: Greetings. I am a member of the board of trustees at _____. Our board is preparing to consider whether or not to renew the contract of our current Head of School. Our Head suggested that I contact you for any insights you could provide on such a review, as well as the current school environment for recruitment/retention. I would welcome your thoughts.”

This Consultant's curiosity was piqued. Was the question about seeking benchmarks in the marketplace intended to help the Board make an informed decision about how to compensate the current Head? (The Head, who is familiar with Littleford & Associates services, thought this was the intent of the email.) Or was it a signal that the Board is thinking that it is time to assess market replacement costs and learn about search strategies? Or was the Head hoping for more money or hinting he/she might be open to other options?

What is wrong here and how should this process unfold properly?

We have written an article posted on our website and the link is here:

<https://www.jlittleford.com/how-to-fire-the-head-and-more-than-once/>

The article is about the board's need to support your head until it has reached a firm conclusion that the relationship cannot continue and about how to find a professional, amicable way out that works for both the school and the outgoing head. But what boards should not do is hint or imply that the head's contract may not be renewed and raise questions in the minds of all board members. In many international and independent schools, these “hints” almost invariably lead to leaks to the administration, faculty and parent body that the head's departure is imminent. We have now entered the territory of very poor governance.



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

A Head received a call from a search Consultant who said, “Are you leaving, because I just had a call from your new Chair indicating that the School might be in search mode and is ready to hire us.” The Head had no idea about this. The former Chair with whom the Head had had a very good working relationship had moved on, and the new Chair whom the Head knew not so well was relatively new to the Board. Of course, the search Firm had broken protocols by calling the Head, but this same Firm had placed her there and felt obligated to see if something was amiss.

The Head was perplexed. She had two more years to go on her current contract and had thought the Board wanted to extend. Her evaluations were exemplary, and she knew the faculty and parent body held her in high esteem. Should she confront the Chair directly or approach this more subtly?

She initiated a meeting with the Chair and probed gently about the future. The Chair gave no indication that he had called the search Firm. The Head checked with the one Board Member whom she could trust, but he had no idea about this. Now the Head realized that the Chair had taken the initiative on his own to launch a search for a new Head. The Head decided to leave on her own terms and at the next board meeting announced her decision not to renew her contract once it ended in two years.

The decision of whether or not to renew a head’s contract should come from the board chair or the Head Support Committee. If the school does not have such a Committee, it should form one.

The Head Support Committee is the designated group to oversee the terms of the head’s contract and his or her evaluation process, not the governance committee. The chair of the board is always chair of the Head Support Committee.

The Board Member who wrote the note above was well intentioned. There apparently seemed to be real uncertainty about extending this Head’s contract. However, no head should be the last to know this, and a frank conversation between the head and chair should come first. The chair should direct the conversation back to the Head Support Committee and from that group there should be a recommendation to the full Board.

Contract renewal begins with the chair. He or she should check with the Executive Committee and then indirectly and discreetly with each board member to ascertain support for the head’s contract extension. If all are in agreement, fine, If not, then....

1. The chair needs to determine if the opposition is one or two unhappy board members or if there is wider concern.
2. The chair needs to have a frank conversation with the head to discuss whether the issues/relationships/concerns are fixable, and how the head wants to address them.
3. If the chair believes that the problem is being blown out of proportion, or if the head is



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

receiving blow back for a correct decision made, or if the chair believes that one or more board members are attempting to throw the head “under the bus” unjustifiably, then a courageous chair will take a stand, push back against the naysayers and push for that contract extension.

If a head makes the decision not to renew on his or own, then a head needs to proceed with caution. Throwing a hat in the ring somewhere else, even informally, requires a request that the search firm handle that subtle inquiry very discreetly. If there is potential interest on both sides, then the head must speak with his or her chair immediately before the search process goes any further. If a board chair or member or a stakeholder learns that a sitting head in good standing is seriously looking elsewhere without having previously consulted with the board chair, the head’s job could be in jeopardy.

There are many instances where the chair is supportive of a head’s desire to move on possibly for family reasons or because the head feels that he or she has done all he or she can for the school and has given the chair plenty of notice.

It is challenging for a head of school to resign in a timely fashion, and if a head does resign voluntarily it should be with 12 to 18 months’ notice to the board. This gives both parties the appropriate amount of time to look for another option.

Once a head resigns, there is no going back. If a head is let go involuntarily or is without a job for a year (even if the school pays for that year) it can be a challenge for that head to find the next school.

Most search committees will have questions about that year.

Aspiring school heads have none of these issues as they can look and continue to look with shorter notice as long as their relationship with the boss/head is a solid one.

Boards should never leave a head’s contract and compensation review until the last minute. The head is responsible for handling these relationships with all other staff on a timely basis. The head deserves the same treatment. We have known of many boards that with only 6 months left to go in a head’s contract had yet not offered a new contract or had a conversation with the head about evaluation and compensation. This is embarrassing and unfair and yet happens all too often. Frequently, the chair is just busy and is making the assumption that the head will, of course, stay. However, treating a head in that manner is a signal that the head should begin thinking about looking elsewhere.

A healthy governing board has only three roles: mission integrity (including governance 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

strategic planning); fiscal oversight; and hiring/evaluation/supporting the head of school. If the board fails on the last of these it may ended up harming the first two.