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THE LONGEVITY OF HEADS AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOLS

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What the Latest Research Tells Us

Too frequent turnover of trustees and heads are causing serious problems in the structure of our boards and our schools. These problems damage their long-term financial and emotional health. This article focuses on board structure and behavior, the leadership styles of heads, and other factors that assist in ensuring that effective heads serve longer terms at the same school. Littleford & Associates began research on these topics 20 years ago and published our first article on this subject 10 years ago.

The good news in the latest findings is that both heads and board chairs are lasting longer, and boards are "firing" their heads at a somewhat less rapid rate than even five years ago.

THE KEY QUESTIONS

How do longer terms heads survive? What do they know that other heads do not? What are the qualities of leadership, character, and style that tend to lead to a greater and more significant legacy?

What elements are present in a school's culture and board structure/make up that enable a good head to become an effective long-term leader and builder? What are the forces at work that lead to the frequent and often unpleasant departure of heads?

THE SAD STATE OF HEAD TURNOVER

Still almost seventy percent of all heads of schools are fired. They do not leave of their own volition. Thirty years ago many heads served long terms of office and most left under their own steam. While the job today is more complicated and pressured, and parents, boards, students, alumni, faculty and community are all more demanding than thirty years ago, there appear to be a number of specific factors which leads to the early termination of heads.

THE BEGINNING AND OFTEN THE END

New heads are cautioned to "lay low in the weeds", observe, and make no sudden or controversial



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moves in their first year. This is good advice but may not be an option for many international school heads or those at schools with demanding boards, financial stress or enrollment weakness.

In the second year the knowledgeable head begins to move on pressure points from the board and teachers. Depending on the head's leadership style, the amount of political good will available and school's needs, the head begins to make decisions. In so doing, the head also begins to create friction and "push back" from the constituents, mainly the teaching staff.

By the end of the third year, the head will generally have crossed the Rubicon and may reasonably expect another two or three years of service, OR may find the contract terminated effective at the end of year three or four.

By year five, most school heads have begun to make a difference in the life of the school. But this depends on leadership style. While "Amiables", and "Expressives", will not have accomplished as much as "Drivers" or "Analyticals", they tend to survive up to about 10 years. These four leadership styles are easy "handles" to identify distinctive behavior of heads.

The vast majority of heads are fired in their first five years. If they make it past year five or six, they tend to have more control over their tenure.

THE HEAD'S IMPACT

The head's long term impact on the school only begins to occur after years 8-10 when parents, past parents, board members and alumni begin to feel a debt to the current head for the success of their children, and the fund raising potential begins to pay off. The years of substantive contribution are often 8-15 and more.

THERE IS NO MAXIMUM NUMBER OF YEARS FOR A HEAD'S TENURE

Some have written there should be a limit of 12-15 years to any head's term. Our firm strongly disagrees with this sentiment. The question rests totally on the culture of the school, the structure of the board and the energy, leadership and wisdom of the head.

Heads who stayed beyond 15 years have left some of the greatest legacies. Of course there was only one Frank Boyden. He served 67 years as Head of Deerfield Academy in the United States. This consultant's own Head of School, Byron Forbush of Friends School Baltimore, retired five years ago after 38 years in that role.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LONG TERM HEADS

In the past thirty years long-term trustees have disappeared and with them, long term heads. Count the number of heads today who are in their mid 60's. Count the numbers who have been heads at



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the same school for over 20 years. There are very few of them left. Heads are retiring, permanently from the job today at about age 57.

Littleford & Associates has conducted interviews with over 2,000 trustees in the past 20 years through the process we use to help boards set the compensation and evaluation structure for heads and to follow the principles of healthy board governance. We have been retained by over 2000 schools worldwide to assist with the assessment of head compensation packages and by over 750 on the topic of board governance.

From the interviews with the leadership of these boards, some clear patterns and signals are revealed: how and where school heads are in trouble and how the long term ones are able to survive and thrive.

THE PENDULUM HAS SWUNG TOO FAR

Independent schools were advised in the 1960's and 1970's that our trustees were serving terms that were too long. Schools needed "fresh blood"; boards were becoming stale and inactive. Parents were insufficiently involved. The advice was taken too much to heart. The pendulum swung far too wide in the other direction.

Most boards of independent schools today have two three-year terms a trustee can serve. After that, the trustee must depart for a year. Most do not return after that year off.

THE DIRECT CORRELATION BETWEEN THE LONGEVITY OF SERVICE OF TRUSTEES AND THE LONGEVITY OF SERVICE OF HEADS

Heads generally cannot survive their fourth board chair. So the length of service of each chair has enormous impact on the health of the school and the tenure of heads. This is a powerful statistic in the analysis of board behavior.

The more stable and strong schools with the longer serving heads have trustees who serve for longer periods and chairs who serve at least 3 years and often 5, 8 or more. Yet the typical independent school board chair today serves only a two or three year term. The good news is that this pattern IS changing.

BOARD MEMBERS MAY BE TOO INVOLVED

Today the job of board chair is considered too demanding for a term longer than 2-3 years. How could schools have allowed the chair's time demands to soar to the point that a two year stint exhausts the chair?

One of our school clients has a female head whose contract was on the point of not being renewed.



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The Chair felt overwhelmed with his duties and leading board members all extensively involved in committee work. The trustees were interviewing teachers inappropriately on such topics as program and long-range planning. The trustees were tired, overextended. The head was numb, frozen into inaction by trustee intrusion and criticism of not leading.

Following a restructuring of the board, the Head's contract was renewed; the Chair stayed on; and several unnecessary committees were disbanded. The Head was newly empowered and in her tenth year is now the longest serving head in her area.

Many schools have suffered from similar board exhaustion, intrusion, and unintentional over involvement. The key is to know when this has happened to your own school and before a major crisis results.

THE DIRECT LINK BETWEEN THE CHAIR'S LENGTH OF SERVICE AND THE HEAD'S TERM AND SUCCESS

Schools with longer serving trustees tend have longer serving board chairs and longer serving heads. The culture of one nationally known school is to preserve the best of the best, to celebrate its history and to regard the School as family.

Stability is a hallmark of the School. Heads at this school have served 25 years or more, and the trustees on average have served a 15-18 year term. A quarter of the faculty are graduates, more than 60% have now or had children attending the school. A recent chair was the fourth generation of his family to serve on the Board. While a certain amount of parochialism can occur from such stability, the culture is likely to be much healthier by almost any definition. The board has very little tendency to react prematurely or hysterically to parent, alumni or faculty pressures.

FREQUENT TURNOVER OF HEADS CREATES A POWER VACUUM

Frequent turnover of trustees almost always leads to a frequent turnover of heads. The turnover of heads at elementary day schools tends to be the highest, and in general, higher in schools with all parent boards.

The turnover at boys' boarding schools tends to be the lowest. It is lowest in schools where a majority of trustees are community leaders, past parents and/or alumni. The non-parent constituents have a longer-term view of the school and its mission and less of an overreaction to the news a child brings home from school about a specific teacher or event.

Boards made up primarily of business leaders tend to fire their heads less than half as often as boards comprised primarily of professionals. Business leaders usually report to a board themselves and hire and supervise large numbers of people. Professionals are more likely to intrude into



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management because they have less experience in understanding fully the separation of policy from management. They tend not to report to boards of their own and not to hire and/or supervise very many individuals.

Frequent turnover of trustees, and thus shorter terms for board chairs leads to shorter terms for school heads. This turnover of heads leads to a power vacuum which teachers naturally fill. Every turnover of head creates insecurity for teachers, except in those schools where it happens so often that teachers have become cynical about it. Then such turnover ironically accentuates teacher tenure and security because the school's institutional memory lies not with the board and administration but with the teaching staff.

Littleford & Associates has interviewed over 40,000 independent and international school teachers as part of school climate, compensation and evaluation reviews in the past 22 years. Schools with frequent head turnover tend to be those where the teaching staff is most resistant to change. As a number of teachers have relayed, "We have outlasted previous heads and we will outlive this one".

When boards sense that there is a power vacuum with no clear leadership, they tend to move in on the head and thereby begin to confront teacher behaviors directly. Search committees in such situations often instruct the new head to "clean out the dead wood" referring to longer-term teachers.

In this prescription lies the kiss of death for the head. Long term teachers in such settings are the reservoirs of memory, history and culture. They must be won over and not fired. But they cannot be won over if they believe they are under attack or that they can outlive yet another head. After all, why change focus if the next head will have a whole new set of agendas?

When a school has had weak leadership the power vacuum may be filled by teachers, trustees and sometimes parent groups. Yet the board, in selecting a new head, recognizes the need for leadership and says it wants to back off and empower the head. But this same board often gives very firm directions to the head for change. The new head follows that direction.

The new head then stirs up a hornet's nest. He or she is fired. A new power vacuum is created. The board changes again and no one remembers this pattern--except the senior teachers who remember it all too well.

HEAD TURNOVER DAMAGES HEALTHY SCHOOL CULTURES

While incompetent heads certainly need to be removed, few fit that definition. The head you know (and the board for that matter) is often better than the one you don't know. Boards and heads should not believe that a change will necessarily result in a better relationship. It may be worse.



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Anxiety of staff, resistance to change, insecurity of constituents, lack of confidentiality by board members, and boundary crossing all lead to and result from frequent head turnover.

Boundary crossing alone can lead to disaster. One recent client experienced a kind of teacher revolution. The head, backed by a board somewhat out of touch with parent sentiment, made a mistake in contract letters relating to a salary scale. The Head apologized for the mistake.

Pent up anger and hurt about perceived past errors led the staff to petition the board for action. The board felt out of touch and brought onto the board some of the newer critical parents. Individual teachers, some of whom wanted to have the head fired, had contacted these parents.

The outcome was near termination of the head and the inappropriate crossing of boundaries by every constituency except the students. The board began to micro manage. The teachers began to resist every decision of the head and to leverage for every small advantage. The parents demanded more involvement including some power over who should be retained or fired. The board split into factions.

This School has since stabilized but not without immense pain all around. The head announced an earlier than planned retirement and has since left. Trustees were rebuilding their relationships after some unpleasant attacks on one another.

While the first board may have been somewhat out of touch, it had provided 10 years of stable backing for the head, who put the school on a healthy educational and fiscal footing. The board overreacted and held several public meetings allowing both teachers and parents to attack the head. Having thus undercut the head, the board and head then tried to reestablish boundaries, which constituent groups should not cross. They succeeded to some extent but it has fallen to the successor head to build a stronger board, through additions and departures and insistence upon following the NAIS Principles of Good Practice.

LONG TERM HEADS KNOW HOW TO MANAGE THE BOARD

In the past heads did not have to spend much time cultivating and managing their entire board. Today they ignore such cultivation at their peril. Boards today can range up to 50 trustees. How does a head cultivate and manage 50 bosses? While rare, such large boards do exist.

Long term heads have an important partnership with the board chair. But their management of the board does not take the 30% to 40% of time that many heads today spend on board related activities.

SMALL BOARDS TEND TO BE MORE STABLE THAN LARGE BOARDS



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The most effective size seems to be between 12 and 20. Boards with more than 20 board members become increasingly difficult to monitor and manage and tend to lead to powerful executive committees that become, in effect, the real board. That will work as long as the rest of the board members understand that their role is really rather advisory and peripheral. Otherwise the rest of the board feels like a "rubber stamp" and resentment toward the executive committee follows.

THE POWER AND THE DANGER OF THE HEAD/CHAIR PARTNERSHIP

One of the greatest successes of NAIS has been the annual session for heads and board chairs, "Governance Through Partnership". Many chairs have mentioned that these retreats are beneficial. Board chair/head partnerships probably have contributed to the reduced number of head firings, though the total number fired each year is still dramatic. Littleford & Associates holds an annual retreat at the Stevenson School in Pebble Beach the third week of June. The focus is on "Beyond Partnership" and where 25-40 trustees and heads engage in detailed discussions and exchanges about 10 key areas of board policy. The setting is intentionally small and intimate to allow for concentrated learning and building long term friendships and networks. (See information sheet in this mailing.)

Some heads and chairs find that the very closeness of their partnership can lead other trustees to feel that the chair is too close to the head, and too quick to defend the head without question. This can lead to other trustees distancing themselves from BOTH the head and the chair. This is dangerous as it undermines the one safety mechanism the head has: the respect the chair commands to deflect excessive or inappropriate attacks on the head.

In one major independent school region overseas, the rash of head firings in the past 10 years could be attributed directly to a conference speaker's advice: the chair should protect the head from the intrusion of other trustees upon the head's time. This led to the predominant practice of the chair filtering most communications from and to the head from all trustees. The long term result was that heads did not build connections, chemistry or trust with their individual board members, all of whom are the head's ultimate boss. Board members came to resent this, and when a crisis occurred both the chair and the head came under fire. In most cases, however, it was the head who bore the brunt of the attack and left.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS SHOULD BE EVALUATED AND HAVE THE OPTION TO BE REELECTED ANNUALLY

"No term limits" for the executive provides for greater stability and institutional memory. It is one way to reinstate logic and sanity in decision making, particularly when the head or school is under fire. Institutional memory and generosity of giving often comes from these trustees who serve on



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executive committees for the long term. Rolling three year terms, without limit, are a good option to build institutional memory IF the committee on trustees exercises thoughtful review of trustees before a new three year term begin.

KEEP THE PAST CHAIR ON THE BOARD FOR AT LEAST TWO MORE YEARS

Assuming the outgoing chair was reasonably effective and respected by the board, it is too great a loss to allow this person to depart to make room for the new chair. Former chairs can assist the board in avoiding precipitous decision making that may lead to a head's premature resignation or dismissal. Often outgoing chairs think they will intrude on the turf and style of their successor, and they rush to leave. This is unhealthy and there is plenty of evidence his or her wisdom and experience are still important. On the other hand, the new chair needs to be magnanimous and secure enough to seek the former chair's wisdom.

LONG TERM HEADS ARE NOT "JOINERS"

While participation on committees and other regional activities is a feather in the cap for many heads, the longer-term heads seem not to be driven to pursue this particular form of status or participation. That is not to say long term heads avoid professional growth. They tend to be quite savvy or they would not still be in the saddle. But they understand the need to know and cultivate the home market more than the regional or national one and mind the business of the school. The most effective chairs of the NAIS boards over time have known how much joining they should undertake and how much to remain in touch with their own home market, faculty, students and parents.

LONG TERM HEADS ARE FERVENT ABOUT THEIR VISION

If one thinks of famous long-term heads this axiom becomes obvious. If a head is a "founder" type, someone who has created the school, or breathed new life into a moribund school, he is generally given enormous rein by trustees who are in awe of the work undertaken, the success of the mission, and the change in the lives of their children.

This is not to say a palace coup could not occur. There are many examples of long term heads who thought all was well, when a new chair moved into the role and regarded the head's leadership style as arrogant. These new chairs sometimes see these long-term heads as impediments to change. More often than not, these new chairs have a real concern about power, and who exercises it.

Long term heads generally have the preponderance of power. Some new chairs want a larger piece of that game for themselves and/or for the board as a whole. Balance is important here.

LONG TERM HEADS HAVE STABLE FAMILIES AND SUPPORTIVE SPOUSES OR PARTNERS



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From our conversations it appears as though the longer term and more successful heads have healthy marriages or partnerships. They find stability and support at home and not a culture of tension. It simply reveals that heads who are strong on the home front can concentrate their energies on the school, take time away when needed, and still have the support of a loving partner and family.

LONG TERM HEADS TEND NOT TO BE AMIABLES AND EXPRESSIVES

This may seem too simplistic. But it does appear as though heads who are "charmiers" often are able to mask weaknesses and the inability to confront problems and make tough decisions. These problems are usually discovered, but it can take up to 10 years.

"Drivers" can be outstanding heads if they can survive the first three to five years of turmoil that their style may engender.

"Analyticals" tend to be the long term heads, the survivors. These heads are not bombastic. Like skilled poker players, they reveal little. They do not reflect anger and emotional instability. They "get even" rather than get mad. They make no sudden moves. They wait for some issues to resolve themselves rather than always wading into a mess to try to solve it personally.

As the name implies, analyticals also have the ability to see the hand writing, to test the waters, to understand and manipulate the culture. They are not always "control freaks" but they do have a high need for information control and "channeling". "Out of channel" communication is strictly taboo to these heads.

Analyticals are able to lead effectively and accomplish a great deal because they keep crises to a minimum, have little need to talk too much, and appear at times to be "god like" because they are so mysterious. Most of us know at least one such head. They may seem an enigma to some or just "hard to read" to others.

LONG TERM SUCCESSFUL HEADS TEND TO HIRE NUMBER ONES

The saying goes that people with real leadership strength are "number ones", and they tend to hire similarly strong people for leadership positions. "Number two's", i.e., leaders who are more insecure about competition, hire "number threes", i.e. much less capable people.

Long term heads seem to recruit talented leadership whom the parents and faculty respect and can follow. While these leaders follow the head and take his or her lead in almost all things, they also want to leave and try out their own wings as heads. Many successful long-term heads have launched other successful heads. Some families view this as sad that the school has lost talented senior leaders. However, the longer term view is that a head who attracts, trains and mentors



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future leaders of other schools has brought a powerful and talented resource to his or her own school and to others.

LONG TERM HEADS MAKE THEIR MANAGEMENT PATTERN CLEAR

One well-known head has been in his position for 22 years. He makes it very clear to the teachers every fall that he is not the inside academic leader of the school. He makes it clear to the staff who those internal leaders are. He focuses on external fund raising, building issues and board development. Yet there is never a question among the staff or Board that the head IS in charge. Few significant decisions are made without his input and approval.

However, as with other long-term heads, the others in the leadership team are quite aware of the head's goals, style and structure of decision making. They know when they can and cannot exercise their own discretion. Long term heads make the mission clear, and make clear as well the limits and boundaries of constituent behaviors.

Formulating a powerful vision from a school's mission is a head's primary responsibility. Mission oriented heads are the most successful as they convey to the faculty and parents that they believe in the mission, are committed to carrying it out in all aspects of school life, and can tell stories of real students whose progress and gifts have come from dedication to that mission. This is the "vision" they articulate of the school's mission.

LONG TERM HEADS DO NOT BEND IN THE WIND

Long term heads are clear about the mission when speaking to the parents. In one metro area with three prominent day schools, one school has far more support from its parent community than the other two heads. The head of this school is unwavering about the school's mission and communicates to prospective families that if they do not "buy into" it, they should look elsewhere. There is no urge to shift the mission of the school to meet the needs of each new influential family or new parent clique.

Parents do not want other parents telling the head how to run the school. They want to know that the head has a clear and firm vision. When heads convey that they will shift with the tides of parent opinion and influence, rather than hanging on and making a difference, they are often swept away with that changing tide.

It has been said that in one large urban area there are several heads who personify their schools, have a strong public posture, and have the inner fortitude to stand up to parents with influence, money and power. If they did not, they might find themselves buffeted by parents who perceived their weakness. In this highly competitive environment where perception of strength is as vital as is



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the strength itself. While long term heads DO listen to the voices of parents, they do not convey panic under pressure or a sense of doubt in their own understanding of the school's mission.

The heads of school in this community have a more successful and longer tenure than any other city in the US.

LONG TERM HEADS ARE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT THE HIRING OF TEACHERS

One new school head began to hire a number of young, bright and ambitious teachers. Over the years he noticed that his teachers lacked loyalty and a sense of community and pursued their own ambitions, often at the expense of the school.

From this understanding came the realization that in hiring teachers, one needs to be conscious of qualities other than simply academic ability, and subject matter skills. Long term heads recognize their hires are the future culture of the school. Hiring for "attitude" is something business leaders have long known how to do and effective heads do as well. Credentials on paper are nothing if the teacher lacks empathy and respect for the students and the mission.

LONG TERM HEADS KNOW THE POWER OF THE COMMITTEE ON TRUSTEES

The Nominating Committee or Committee on Trustees is often inactive or moribund. Potentially it is and should be the most powerful committee on the board. Its role should include the evaluation of the board and the board chair as well as the cultivation, recruitment, training and evaluation of all trustees. Few heads pay much attention to this committee and many heads allow their boards to nominate trustees with whom the head is uncomfortable. These trustees may not share the head's mission. From this can come the seeds of the head's ultimate dismissal.

Long term heads know the need to influence the selection of new trustees. Therein lies their ultimate insurance policy. It is manipulative. But long term successful heads are manipulative. They just are more subtle about it than others. Leadership is often the ability to move others in a certain direction and to do so with the other person's consent and support. That often takes a degree of manipulation of the environment and the knowledge of human nature.

LONG TERM HEADS USUALLY KNOW WHEN TO QUIT

This is a tricky one as some long-term heads believe they are irreplaceable. They say they are not. And they believe it in theory. But many succumb to the mantra that they will know when it is time to quit or retire, long before the board has to tell them. While this is not always true, it usually is.

If a long-term head retains good health and feels financially secure, he or she will generally plan his or her departure with adequate notice to the school.



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LONG TERM HEADS ARE NEEDED

Too many independent schools today are still revolving doors for heads. The fallout from this turnover is often very damaging. Heads need to learn how to manage the culture of a school to ensure they will have the ability to make a long-term difference to the quality of education for children.

Excessive turnover takes a toll on the schools, the constituents and on the heads and their families. The long-term impact of such turnover on opportunities missed is immense.

John Littleford
Senior Partner