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THE NEED FOR BI LINGUAL BOARDS AND HEADS: UNDERSTANDING AND SHARING A COMMON LANGUAGE IN THE BOARD ROOM

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Heads normally come up through the ranks of teacher, division head, and assistant head before they land their first headship. A few heads come from the marketing or financial side, from other nonprofits or even more rarely from the business world, but over 90% come with the same educational background as teachers. The teaching profession has built-in biases as do all professions.

Heads have to learn quickly that they are not just academic leaders, but they must become entrepreneurial risk takers, financial management experts, marketing managers, enrollment gurus, and fund raising stars. These are acquired traits and some heads never learn them fully or feel completely comfortable with them. The academic language that heads learn to use and bring to the board room is the language of educators.

Unless they are careful, heads may fall frequently into heavy use of educational jargon. What may confuse board members from other backgrounds are the acronyms that heads often use to describe their curriculum initiatives. For example, what does "21st century education" mean? That is a question many board members have asked me. Does it relate to technology? Does it relate to virtual learning as opposed to optimal physical learning space or both? Does it mean global outreach in some form? Is it a new set of yet undefined skills? Increasingly, it means whatever the head wants it to mean. It is a useful rubric for heads to describe either the direction in which they wish to go or a new, relevant vision that they have learned from consultants or fellow heads.

On the other side of the ledger, most board members of independent and international schools come from these careers: lawyers, doctors, accountants, engineers, business owners and leaders, consultants, bankers, financial managers and periodically venture capitalists, technology specialists, investment bankers, and CEO types. In the international scene, some are embassy representatives, civil servants, or representatives from local companies who refer large numbers of families to the school. Certain business related words and acronyms that board members use may seem like alien



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concepts to heads or at least reflect language that feels unsympathetic to school cultures.

Thus, the two parties, heads and board members, are really communicating in different languages, and often issues can become lost in translation, especially if there is any tension in the board room at the outset.

II. How Do Language Differences and Barriers Evolve?

Alienation can infect the board/head relationship early on if language used by one or both parties is not clearly understood by the other. Damage can also occur if the relationships between chair and head and board and head are not quickly strengthened through mutual respect, good will and a degree of bonhomie. Then the language differences may create cynicism, sarcasm and mistrust among the parties. Often it is not the actual words that may lead to obfuscation between heads and their boards and among board members. What it is really happening is that the parties are talking past one another conceptually and not finding a common ground.

When called for a reference on a Candidate in a search process, the Candidate's current Board Chair said: "If the Board can stay far away from intruding even where it may seem appropriate, then this Head will be successful. In the search process, the Candidate had said, "I do not want to work with a micro-managing board, obviously referring to his current Board. They were talking past one another and perhaps a pattern of this behavior caused the Head to "go looking". Heads may not want to give too much information and invite micromanagement, and boards worry that they are drinking too often the "Kool aid" of the head's good news. Both need to find the right balance of communication.

This Consultant has heard board members relate in confidential questionnaires and in focus groups the tendency of a head to be "caught up in his own lingo" meaning that the head does not appear to be aware of whether or not the board really understands the subject, tone, or direction under discussion. On the other hand, heads, in moments of confidential exchanges or coaching sessions, relate that board members can tend to bring a narrow use of language and concepts to the board room, e.g., lawyers using a testy adversarial approach to problem solving; accountants diving deep into numbers to test the head's financial acumen; or entrepreneurs complaining about a "glacially" slow decision making process that lacks sufficient forward thinking and creativity. Many CEO types know that product innovation and sales require a quick footed assessment of ever changing market conditions. Change, however, can be anathema to school cultures especially in domestic independent schools where teachers tend to prefer the status quo. Confusion or mistrust can occur on both sides.

Strategic planning involves projecting challenges and risks as well as priorities and opportunities



and this is the arena in which miscommunication and misunderstanding are likely to occur. Some business terminology seems omnipresent in the board room of the independent and international school to the point that phrases such as "good to great", "moving to the next level" and "generative thinking" become overused and lose their impact. Fifteen years ago heads were perplexed when board members used "dashboard indicators" constantly as a measurement of accomplishment. Then heads began to adopt this language as well and it now appears as often in their communication as it does in that of board members. On one level you could consider this a victory as the two groups came to adopt each other's verbiage and the initial language barrier broke down.

III. How to Find a Common Language

How do we help both board members and heads achieve a common "language" and more important, move more easily in and out of key strategic conversations? We can start with these precepts:

1. Heads need to avoid a constant stream of educational jargon.
2. Board members need to make every effort to learn about the educational enterprise but to view it strategically, not on the micro level
3. Boards need to have a balance of expertise and backgrounds represented and that means avoiding too many from the same profession.
4. Boards need more CEO's of large publicly held companies and/or the CEOs of large privately held companies. They are very rare in the international school board room. These individuals bring enormous insights into the leadership of a board and can share with the head common challenges of working for boards and hiring and firing of staff. Professionals do not have similar roles in their daily work. Only CEO's have that direct experience.
5. Orientation for new board members would be enhanced if heads and COT (governance committee) chairs could devise a vocabulary list that would explain certain terminology (including some of the typical phrases used in teacher appraisal and curriculum initiatives) that initially may be alien to non-educators.



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6. Chairs and heads could prepare together and upfront the language that they will use in explaining initiatives to the rest of the board.

7. The head should take the lead in outlining key phrases at the beginning of each school year and encourage an environment in which people can ask for an explanation without feeling awkward.

8. Ensure that the latest technological jargon does not dominate the board room without clarification of its meaning. One intelligent Board Member asked me: "What does the Head really mean by virtual education and how does that fit into a K to 12 school."

A London Business School's Study of successful cross-cultural teams found several important practices regarding communication which differentiated them from teams which failed.¹ Those practices substantiate those that this Consultant recommends:

1. Discuss built in similarities, differences, and language confusion. Commit to listening especially carefully to individuals who are in the minority (whether by virtue of their professional background, culture, personality type, etc.)
2. Develop language to discuss differences and give feedback.
3. Encourage meaningful participation from all members.
4. Keep a visual record of what is said.
5. Summarize and check for consensus.



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6. Keep track of time.

7. Use intuition and insight to point up differences and/or prejudices causing tension or exclusion of members. Use judgment as to when to focus on similarities and when to use differences to generate creative conflict.

8. Employ a decision-making process which avoids unconscious alliances. For example, during a brain storming session, have individuals write down their key thoughts and then read them aloud. That allows members to focus on the content of the ideas rather than automatically agreeing with the most powerful person on the Board or some other unconscious alliance.

9. Aim for "I can live with that" rather than complete consensus. It will, obviously, not be possible to arrive at total consensus on every decision. Successful teams therefore stated as one of their process guidelines at the outset that they would pursue discussions until members felt their ideas/perspective has been understood by others in the group. Then, whether all members agreed or not, the group would move forward.

10. Build in time for feedback and review of group process.

This Study showed that groups that spent time upfront outlining their guidelines and preserving time to review periodically the group's process fared much better than groups which tried to simply "launch into the work". As the researchers phrased it "Start slow, clarify language, finish strong. Start fast and risk not finishing." Building a common language and process framework allows for effective performance.

Boards and heads need to find common words in order to communicate with each other effectively and to view the world at least part of the time through the lens of the other party. Boards need to understand (not manage!) the range of academic, curricular, personnel, disciplinary and parental issues that heads confront daily, while heads need to understand better the financial/business/strategic realities that particularly business and finance oriented board members face. This is not to invite board members into the classroom or into micro managing



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behaviors nor is it to expect heads to become "business-like" as their foremost style. This is about listening and finding common ground and ultimately about board governance training.

Worldwide, Littleford & Associates conducts workshops and provides one-on-one executive coaching that improve and enhance communications between heads and boards, heads and board chairs and among board members.

¹ Sue Canney Davison, "Creating a High Performance International Team", The Journal of Management Development vol. 13, Number 2, 1994.

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