



Management Consulting to Independent
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THE PANDEMIC: WHAT WE WILL HAVE LEARNED

Posted on January 25, 2021

In this and subsequent articles, we will address the key issues that the Pandemic has affected, and will continue to affect our independent and international schools going forward: board governance, strategic planning and enrollment challenges.

One Head recently wrote: “The issue here always seems to be the same- boards not understanding the line between issues and items on which they should be focused, versus operational issues. Whenever things get challenging (and sometimes even when they don’t) that line seems to be less and less respected.”

Another Head wrote: “When the board starts to go off the rails a bit on governance they feel that curriculum, personnel issues, etc. might eventually cause reputational damage in the community. That is how they justify their need to be involved.”

Boards have three jobs: mission integrity, fiscal oversight and hiring, supporting (and changing) the head of school. But there is a risk that those overriding vital responsibilities are being lost in a fog of board anxiety and real or perceived concern about stakeholder unhappiness.

Another Head writes: “When each day feels like two, I do wonder if many heads may be tempted to hang it up in the next year or two out of sheer exhaustion....but heads don’t want to complain to trustees so they suffer silently and commiserate with other heads.”

Heads are under more pressure than ever before. The occupation of head of school is more stressful, and in many ways less rewarding during these times. Most heads are former teachers and have a caregiving versus risk-taking mentality. Yet boards seem not to understand the need to check the pulse of heads in order to ascertain how they and their families are weathering this storm. This IS a governance issue.

What are the friction points, i.e., how has governance been affected by these COVID times?

I. What Are Stakeholder Expectations Now?

Current and past parents, alumni, faculty and staff and major donors are all stakeholders in our independent and international schools, and being in stressful and uncharted waters now, many are



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more vocal and demanding. In varying degrees, all have a “need to know” more than ever. And in a well-intentioned effort to be part of a solution to a problem, they may seek greater involvement in the daily operations of the school.

Thus, school leadership is seeing from these groups a desire for more input, more transparency regarding decision-making, more communication with and among stakeholders, and a desire for more and better listening on the part of the board and administration. We are also seeing some attempts by stakeholders, especially current parents and alumni, to influence board members and policy. Alumni are coming forward with their past experiences as persons of color in our schools, and many have strong and very personal opinions about their alma mater’s response to BLM and the development of DEI initiatives.

Stakeholders may demand more input and participation in strategic planning going forward. Broad participation, i.e., beyond the board and senior leadership, in a strategic planning process is not always wise. In these times, stakeholders may be more likely to bring narrow, personal issues to the process.

II. The Impact on Financial Sustainability and Governance

There has been greater parental sensitivity to tuition increases and pressures on boards and heads to offer a tuition discount or partial refunds even though most stakeholders have little or no idea or appreciation of the cost of remote/hybrid learning. Some schools have succumbed to this pressure, but this short-term appeasement may have negative long-term financial consequences. It may be very difficult for the stakeholders to accept the larger tuition increases that will be inevitable, and they may try to exert this influence again in the future.

Current parents may lobby to serve on the finance committee even though this is a committee that should be composed of board members only. Some stakeholders may be more interested in the audit and in the salaries of the head and senior administrators as reported on the IRS Form 990. The board chair should be prepared for this and have a concise, fact-based response ready to answer any questions about the audit and/or senior leadership compensation.

While major gift and annual fund participation may have declined, it is not a good idea to abandon or postpone a capital campaign. That will only cause a school to fall farther behind in its capital funding.

III. Would Does this Mean for Best Practices for Boards?



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The theme of this section is strong and stable boards: how to build and sustain them in this critical time.

It all begins with developing a healthy board through the Committee on Trustees and its eight roles. Under the Articles section of our website, there are several articles that describe those key functions in detail. The chair and head need to be active participants on the COT in the vetting and selection of new trustees, especially during this time when there is a heightened demand by current parents to serve on boards. Beware of the narrow interests that they may want to bring to the board room.

But even experienced trustees need reminders now as this Consultant continues to hear about trustees crossing boundaries of authority through attempts at micromanagement and violating channels of communication by engaging in inappropriate communications, especially with current parents and faculty and staff. It is important to note that many of these trustees mean well, but they feel that they should be listening and helping. Usually a governance refresher course resolves these behaviors, but in unusual circumstances disciplinary action through the COT may be necessary.

A strong board chair is especially important now and a seasoned, wise board chair should be encouraged to stay on in the role.

What about board chair selection and tenure? We have described a whole “wheel” of qualities that chairs should possess or should strive to cultivate. These include courage, strength, compassion, collaboration, leadership wisdom and not lobbying for the position.

The head should absolutely have input in a selection of a new chair who should serve three to five years or agree not to serve at all. Most heads are “fired” by their third or fourth board chair often because the new chairs have no time to develop a solid partnership with the head or appreciate the head’s accomplishments.

The chair should have the skills to keep meetings on track and politely but firmly manage the dialogue in the room. Every board member should have the opportunity to speak and no one person should dominate the conversation or bring stories about their children’s or their friends’ children’s experience to the meeting. The first hour of the meeting should be focused upon the immediate issues at hand and the second hour should be devoted to a strategic topic that does not require an immediate response.

This Consultant recommends that boards avoid executive session unless it is time to evaluate the head or there is a need to address some serious legal or moral issue. Regular executive sessions without the head present are risky, hurtful, undermining and do not constitute best practice in the independent school world.



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Boards must ensure that all members sign annually a no conflict of interest document and a confidentiality document. Not just now. But always. Littleford & Associates can provide samples.

Committee structure is especially important now. This Consultant has seen more demands for board subcommittees that intrude on the head's and senior leadership's turf such as a "Faculty Support Committee", a "School Culture Committee", etc. However what IS needed especially now is a DEI Committee. The chair of the DEI Committee should be a highly respected board member with close ties to the board chair. This Committee's charter may vary by school as each school's experience with diversity, equity and inclusion issues is different. But again, there is a risk that this Committee could stray into micromanagement.

IV. Head Evaluation in these COVID Times ...and Afterwards

More board members may advocate for 360 evaluation of the head now in order to respond to increased constituent demands for more transparency. This is not a good practice for most schools and heads even if the head asks for it or feels pressure to agree to it, and it is even more dangerous when some constituents are unhappy with their overall pandemic experience. The difference between the corporate and the independent and international school realms is that no corporate CEO has board members whose children are influenced by the CEO's employees.

Why is an active Head Support and Evaluation Committee especially key now? Heads are exhausted and feeling vulnerable, and most have not had a meaningful break since the Pandemic began. However, some well-meaning boards are not picking up on this. Heads tend not to want to complain to their boards and thus, turn to other heads for support. Their own boards should be providing sufficient professional and personal support.

What about head compensation now? This is also not the time for boards to keep the head's salary flat or consider asking him/her to take pay cut ALTHOUGH some heads have voluntarily refused a pay increase this year and possibly next.

This is not an optimal time to conduct a head of school search unless absolutely necessary. This is a time when boards should want to retain, appreciate and reward a good head. There are ways to do this that are sensitive to the financial stress that many of our schools are experiencing now. For example, schools might consider performance-related deferred compensation plans.

Heads must be politically smart but not defensive, and the chair/head partnership remains crucial. The chair should remain the head's staunchest public supporter and loyal private critic. The rule "No surprises" goes both ways.



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Our next e blast will focus on the structure, timing and risks/opportunities of strategic planning.