



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 SEARCH AND THE DEPARTING HEAD: VALUED OR FORGOTTEN?**

*Posted on August 1, 2015*

The manner in which a board treats an outgoing head could impact substantially the nature and success of the search for his or her successor.

A young Head was hired at age 30, to replace a veteran "war horse" Head who had served twenty-four years. While the retiring Head had almost rebuilt the School from a near demise some years before, in his last years, he could not be fully present due to health issues. Some felt that the School was losing momentum and that some misbehaving faculty were not being held accountable.

The Board of friends and loyal supporters decided reluctantly to ask the Head to retire early at the age of 59. He agreed to this decision with some resentment.

The new Head was assertive, focused and had a strong administrative track record despite his young age. He seemed to be exactly what the search committee was seeking, or so they thought. The "polar opposite" pendulum began to swing, however, as the new Head with no head experience replaced the elder statesman. There was neither an acknowledgement of a transition period nor any thought of the concept of transition.

The new Head received the same benefit package and school-owned home plus 20% more salary. The retiring Head was living off a modest retirement benefit as the Board had never really benchmarked his pay package and was thus surprised about what the market demanded it pay to land a qualified replacement. This only upset the retiring Head more. In the new Head's first year he began to "hold court" to disgruntled long term faculty who felt that the new Head was treading on their privileged positions that had become entrenched during the retired Head's last three years.

Finally, after eighteen months of the former Head stirring up trouble, the Board asked him to leave town at least for one year. He responded that if the Board would take care of his under funded retirement asset, he would be pleased to oblige.

The Board set up a deferred compensation plan with sufficient up front funding. The new Head and Board made the commitment to ensure that this plan was managed and would grow appropriately.



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

With that assurance and having left the area, the former Head stopped meddling in school politics. The new Head, now in his third year, began to seek advice and counsel from the former Head. The two became eventually fast friends, and the former Head was invited back often for ceremonies and activities. Upon the departure of the "new" Head, the now long retired Head returned to praise him at his final graduation.

Many lessons were learned from this not so unique case history, i.e., how to: handle a search; plan for a transition; honor a long serving retiring head; prevent the departing head from meddling in school business; and rebuild a fractured relationship between an inexperienced new head and a long serving but "wounded" former one.

Heads of schools tend to depart from their schools according to one of the following four patterns:

1. The Head's Legacy Remains Intact and an Ongoing Role is Needed and Valued

In this case, the head leaves on his or her own steam having given adequate notice. After an intermediate or longer term, the head is honored appropriately and perhaps even plays a modest to substantial role in fund raising or consulting with some form of compensation.

There is usually a generous severance arrangement equivalent to a full year's salary called either severance or a "sabbatical." There is trust that the head will work comfortably with the new head after an appropriate time away and that the new head will have significant say over the degree of involvement of this predecessor.

In other words, the separation is amicable and the leaders understand and respect appropriate boundaries. Chemistry or a tacit agreement between the two generally prevents trouble. The departing head is honored and available as needed, and the new head is not impeded or intruded upon. This occurs usually when a valued head is retiring and not moving to another school. The school appreciates the value of the fund raising contacts and political clout of the former head and both may be wielded to help support and shield the new head in the transition period.

In some cases, the new head was the assistant or associate head who was promoted from within. The vast majority of such internal promotions succeed in part because the new (but "insider") head understands the legacy of his predecessor and would hope to receive the same generous and honorable treatment.

In one School, a ten year Head who had made major contributions to the School on many fronts recommended that the Board seriously consider the Assistant Head as her successor. The retiring Head felt the Assistant could and would obtain a headship elsewhere and the School might well not find a candidate as strong. After some exploration of the options, the



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

Board decided to appoint the Assistant as the new Head, but only after another year of transition of working with the outgoing Head. The entire community was educated about the transition and accepted it warmly. There were no bumps in the road.

The outgoing Head will remain on as a consultant for two to three years, focusing on fund raising. The rising Head and the outgoing retiring Head have had a strong professional relationship as this wise Head gave more and varied leadership opportunities to the Assistant to allow him to mature in the role. While not common, this kind of transition can be one of the healthiest.

In another case, the long serving outgoing Head, whose roots ran deep as a former student and teacher, was replaced by a colleague from another school. The Board gave the outgoing Head a four year appointment to assist with a major capital campaign. The incoming Head gave strong endorsement to the arrangement and honored the former Head during their time together. The departing Head kept out of internal school politics in the transition. The two remain friends and colleagues.

In contrast, some long term heads have difficulty letting go. Some want to be on the search committee, to influence it overtly or from behind the scenes. This is more typical of "founders" who fear letting go of their "baby" but it is also common among tireless leaders whose identity may have become defined by the school, and they view it as their primary source of gratification.

There are also those former heads who stay in the area and play host (either openly or behind the scenes) to a chorus of critics who make a bee line for that person's door to gossip about the new head. In one School, a popular Head, as part of his retirement package, was given a house close to the campus. During the fall of the new Head's first year, the former Head was seen greeting the students and parents at the front door of the School and at the end of the day in the carpool line. These are types of behavior that are beyond the range of acceptable for a retired head.

In another School, when the new Head was absent from campus at conferences or meetings, the former Head would return to visit for a day, apparently at the invitation of faculty still very loyal to her. She would reconnect with parents and teachers and sympathize with their complaints about the new regime. In both of these situations, the Chairs did not address this behavior with the prior Heads, and the new Heads felt "caught between a rock and a hard place." While they knew they were being undermined, they also knew it would be politically disastrous to criticize (or appear to criticize) the beloved former Head.



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

Fortunately the vast majority of heads who leave on good terms with their boards have other appealing options or healthy retirement plans and recognize their need to leave their former school alone, almost totally, for at least one or two years, unless the board has given them a specific role.

## 2. The Typical "Parting of the Ways"

The head leaves with an amicable separation and plays no further role in the life of the school, but may be invited back to visit some years later. He or she may receive a modest severance at departure. There is usually another headship that follows. The search is not affected significantly but the legacy of the head may not be honored or celebrated much in departing. The new head is aware that the school has little sense of the tradition of valuing the contributions of the outgoing head.

This is not a crisis and is the norm of most transitions where the departing head is moving on to another school and was not "fired." However, independent schools tend to have a bad habit in such situations of not maintaining appropriate connections with these former heads who can assist the school with important contacts and who may have left a valuable legacy.

No egregious errors have been made here, and there is little fallout from the separation. There is regret only in that many valuable former heads are allowed to depart without ongoing recognition of their work, and this may have an impact on how the new head views the board. Retention of a connection with former heads signals to the new head that the school values tradition, continuity, and fairness and treats departing heads with honor. Wise boards and heads invite past heads to return periodically to be a part of the tradition and history of the school. Heads should not fear former heads who have been away at least a year, and heads should take the lead in maintaining the connections.

## 3. The Seemingly Amicable Departure

In some cases, the head's contract is not renewed and the separation may be professional but not amicable even though the outside world may not know of the reasons or the nature of the unpleasantness. There is no compensation or severance support for the departing head. However, the disagreement and termination are kept within the bounds of propriety allowing both parties to move on. The new head is not necessarily distrusting, but he or she has received the signal or subtle message that the school and board may not have an inclination to treat an outgoing head with at least a tradition of honoring his or her contributions.

In this scenario, wise heads will want a stronger contract with tighter language regarding separation and may want an attorney to review the document which this consultant always advises. Amazingly, the vast majority of heads never have their own attorney review a contract



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

before entering into a relationship with a new board and school.\*

This kind of separation is fairly common within independent schools. However, in this instance, new heads are more likely to play their bets safely, and perhaps wait to sell a former home until the security and trust of the new assignment is clear over the first three years. Trustee behavior in the first three to five years will signal to this new head whether the worry and anxiety were justified.

#### 4. The Unpleasant Public Separation

There are also those unfortunate situations when the head is fired before the contract term was completed and the entire community is aware of this, including the external world of prospective new heads. There may be a legal disagreement and challenge about the terms of separation. The search for the new head certainly will be affected as the word is out in the public domain. Generally, outstanding candidates will tend to avoid this search or will probe at great lengths with the search consultant and committee about the reason for this dismissal before even considering the position.

Boards that engage in this kind of termination (unless for moral turpitude or gross misconduct) can engage in this behavior again. This may represent a serious lack of good governance practices and immaturity in trustee selection, training and behavior.

Of course, there may be a very legitimate reason for this separation. It may be simply that the head was ineffective. However, the school did choose and hire this person, and the manner in which the school fires him or her sends a signal about how it does or does not play by the rules of the game.

In another case, the Head was called to the local country club for an unexpected executive committee meeting. Upon his arrival, he was fired and told to clean out his desk at school on that very day. He had received a quite positive evaluation three months earlier, and his contract had been extended. There were no moral or legal reasons for his dismissal. However, a new member of the executive committee had enough sway over the other members that they followed his strong desire to be rid of the Head.

The School did not honor the termination provision of the "not for cause" scenario. The Board assumed the Head would not retain a tough attorney and not go public but would settle in order to avoid any implication that he was terminated for some serious grievance. The move backfired, the Head sued for the full severance amount, and the newly launched search was aborted. An internal Interim was appointed from the ranks of the BOARD. Two years later, the Board conducted a more "normal" search in an attempt to sweep away much of the nastiness



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

of the prior firing.

This case received widespread attention, and the School has never really recovered fully from the "word in the street" about this firing. Prospective heads still hear a version of this story from the independent school grapevine whenever the School launches a new search.

## 5. Conclusion

Boards should never make the assumption that their behaviors are not known outside of their internal school community. How boards and search committees handle the prior head as well as the search will be a defining moment for boards and will reveal to potential candidates and newly hired heads how such a board may treat them.

\*Contracts are generally neutral, balanced and fair in tone or clearly favor the board in any kind of separation. Infrequently the contract is weighted in favor of the head, but this is usually only true in situations where there is a founding or a very long term head.

John Littleford  
Senior Partner