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TOO MANY COOKS IN THE KITCHEN AND THE HEAD WAS “COOKED”!

Posted on March 18, 2019

We received a call some months ago from a Head whose initial three-year contract was about to be renewed. The Board Chair told the Head that his contract would be extended for an additional two years beyond the 18 months still remaining on the first contract. All seemed well and the Head was happy to report this to his family.

The Head called this Consultant two months later to say that the following events had occurred. Two weeks after the Chair told him his contract would be renewed and the evaluation feedback from the Board was very positive, the Chair came back and said the Board now wanted to conduct a 360 review of his performance. (See comments below about 360 and the risks of using that approach.)

This surprised the Head and he wondered if the Board might renege on the contract renewal offer. The Chair acted as if the 360 review were normal practice, just as it is in the business world. He led the Head to believe that it was formality at this point. The Chair asked to interview personally each of the Head's six direct reports.

Two weeks later, the Chair told the Head that his contract would not be renewed and that the current school year would be his last, although the School would pay him through the remaining 18 months of his contract. The Chair gave no explanation. The Head was shocked and devastated.

The Head called our Firm to ask for advice because we knew this Head from his positions in his former schools. After asking about change management issues, board turnover and chair/head relationship, this Consultant asked the Head how many, if any, of the direct reports had been formal or informal candidates in the head search that ultimately resulted in his appointment. He paused, and then said he thought, “Three.”

We then explored the nature of his relationship with the entire leadership team and with each one individually and how these relationships had evolved during his tenure. It seems that at least one, if not more members of the leadership team had given negative reviews to the Chair about the Head's first 18-month performance.



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We suspected that end-runs from the Leadership Team to the Board about the Head had been occurring periodically without the Head's knowledge. As a last resort, this Consultant suggested that the Head recommend to the Chair an onsite visit during which there would be a review of the head evaluation process as part of a board governance workshop. He was told that that door was closed.

The Search firm had never conveyed to the Head that there were informal or formal internal candidates for his position. He never knew that one member of the leadership team served as one of the advisors to the head search committee. The Search firm had never warned the Board that a disappointed and aspiring internal head candidate, much less three of them, might undermine any new external appointee's leadership.

There were other factors working against the new Head, unbeknownst to him in his first headship and to the Board members who seemed, like many others we have seen, unaware of transition pitfalls.

The Board gave the Head five ambitious goals to accomplish in his first year. Most were inappropriate for a Head who had no political capital with constituents upon his arrival. Nevertheless, in order to please his Board he felt compelled to dive in even though the nature of the changes implemented were too uncomfortable and the pace of change too fast for the culture.

During that first 18 months, the Head had two Chairs. Three of the 9 board members on the search committee had rolled off the Board. The memory of why the Head was hired had already faded by the time the Head hit a bump in the road. The bump was a disciplinary issue involving the bullying of a Board member's child. After a thorough investigation by the Head and a discipline committee, the bullying child was suspended but not expelled. The full Board did not support that decision. The Board member whose child had been the victim reached out to two members of the leadership team who had been candidates and together they commiserated about the poor choice of Head and how an inside appointee would have expelled the student to the satisfaction of the Board Member.

The Head did leave as scheduled. The Board appointed a new permanent Head without a new search. The new Head was a Board member who had been a former Head of another school. Missing that role, he lobbied for the position behind the scenes and got it. According to the dismissed head, this individual had acted as an informal counsel and advisor to him during the tough evaluation process. The head was shocked when this individual was appointed as his replacement. He felt betrayed.

There are stranger tales in our schools but there are many lessons in this one.

1. Never invite or encourage strong internal candidates to throw their hats in the ring for head of



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school and then disappoint them. In other words, tell them up front if they will not be considered at all, rather than make them feel as if they might get the job when the board knows full well it would not appoint one or any of them. That only creates embittered people. When the new external head makes his or her first real or perceived misstep, disappointed internal candidates either wonder if they should have been appointed or engage in gossip that they should have.

2. If there is one very strong candidate inside, a candidate so strong that outside candidates would be driven away, then consider conducting an “executive assessment” to ascertain if the inside candidate should be appointed without a search. Perhaps the inside candidate is the best possible candidate. An objective third-party should conduct this assessment and Littleford & Associates has successfully done this for several schools.

3. Remember that 90% of all searches hire external heads but 80% of those heads are “fired” (or not renewed or counseled to leave) in their first three to six years.

4. Only 10% of searches hire inside candidates but only 10% of those are “fired.” Why are we not doing a better job of internal succession planning?

5. Why do we not develop appropriate transition and succession plans that allow all heads to have a normal honeymoon and transition period before they have to delve deep into crucial issues and controversial decisions?

6. New heads often find that their first major crises arise from terminating a popular teacher or administrator, usually someone whom the prior head clearly should have nudged out. Many new heads miscalculate the degree of board support they have when they part company with a popular teacher or administrator who often has a back door to the Board itself.

7. Why do boards insist on a 360 review for the head drawing often on experience from the corporate world when in that world there is no situation where a CEO has board members whose children are influenced by the CEO’s employees? The situations are not comparable.

8. The Board above went into Executive Session after the 6 leadership team members were interviewed by the Chair, and the Head was excluded from that session, not told anything about it or given any chance to rebut or counter anything those six individuals had said.

9. Executive session is appropriate when there is an issue of illegality, moral turpitude, gross misconduct or a contract/compensation review. Any school that goes into executive session regularly or periodically for other reasons should think carefully about the impact of those sessions on the head’s self-confidence and the impact on the relationship between the head and board overall. Most heads tell this Consultant they never really know what happens in those sessions and



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the chair seldom if ever gives them a timely or full review of the content of executive sessions.

10. Too many “cooks in the kitchen” is what happens when aspiring internal head candidates are encouraged inappropriately to throw their hat in the ring for a head search in their current school; and then when disappointed start maneuvering in a crisis situation or power vacuum to supplant the new head; and do not leave to take on a headship elsewhere.

Back to our story. The new Head (i.e., former board member) then left within a year under challenging conditions. The Board appointed an interim from the inside who had previously wanted the job, i.e., TWO heads before. He then became the permanent Head. The political intrigue came full circle but not without great institutional instability, angst and reputational damage to the School. Much of this might have been avoided with board governance training with an emphasis upon head evaluation and transition issues