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TRANSITIONS, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND.. FAILURE: HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

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Schools which attempt major change or a new strategic plan at the same time as a head transition often run into difficulties. The effort is made with good intentions, but often boards and heads are unaware of the dangers which so often torpedo their efforts. This article outlines the dangers and recommends measures to avoid them as well as laying out effective ways to launch and focus a strategic plan.

Recently, a prominent, respected independent School began a strategic planning process at the same time that it was undergoing a search for a new Head. The thought was to complete and approve the plan before the final search decision, so that the new Head would have his marching orders immediately. All candidates were asked in their interviews if they could endorse the plan wholeheartedly. All said yes. No one, including the candidates themselves, asked the question: "How can a leader be expected to lead if that person is not given a role in guiding the direction of the School?"

The prior head had been a "soft touch", much beloved by teachers for his kindness and lack of close scrutiny over them in and outside of the classroom. The faculty equated this freedom with "professional" treatment, but the reality was that with all good intent very little substantive evaluation or supervision was in place. The new strategic plan included "dashboard indicators", a jargon that was foreign to the faculty and culture of this school which was unaccustomed to formal performance measures. Driving the plan was a board member who was an engineer by training, brilliant but not attuned to faculty issues and not in touch with the school's faculty culture or aware of the concept of school culture as vastly different from corporate cultures.

Nor did anyone appreciate the critical underlying need to understand the pace of change in schools versus the pace of change in the corporate world. The essence of a successful business strategy is innovation and hence change which needs to be ongoing and dynamic if a business is to remain competitive. While schools need to remain competitive in their own marketplace as well, change moves at a snail's pace in comparison, and certain changes should only be attempted when the timing is exactly right so as to avoid upsetting the culture and key constituents. **Understanding faculty culture, and school culture in general, is a sine qua non before launching a strategic**



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planning process.

The new Head arrived to serve a Board and Chair who prided themselves on following the best guidelines for healthy board governance. However, it became immediately apparent to the new Head that the Board had several factions: one small faction that backed the Chair; another larger one behind the Planning Committee Chair whose constant theme was "accountability"; and a third group of more distant trustees, mostly alumni, who were removed from the School and its current culture. **While they felt well read on the topic of board governance, the Board had never been through a formal training session, at least not in anyone's recent memory. The concept of "transition" was never discussed.**

The Head was reminded often that his evaluation would be based upon on how well he carried out the strategic plan which had nine broad goals and seven to ten "dashboard indicators" attached to each goal. Progress and success would be monitored closely according to detailed measurements. **No Board member (and certainly not the new Head) thought to revisit the scope or manageability of the Plan.**

The new strategic plan included the development of a substantive teacher evaluation process as only one type of accountability to be put in place. It did not occur to anyone that formal teacher evaluation would be foreign and threatening to this faculty. **Faculty in many K-12 day schools fear meaningful, substantive evaluation because they have not been shown that it can be (a) done well or consistently; (b) a tool for professional development; and (c) potentially one way to predict and influence their compensation.**

A second reason did not occur to anyone as well: that this School, like so many others, was characterized by close professional and personal interrelationships and often "boundary crossing" among teachers and parents. **The Board was not trained to recognize that some of these very close school relationships were potentially undermining to the success of its well-intentioned goal of becoming less of a "mom and pop" family operation.**

This raises another point about the difference between corporate and school cultures: teachers and even most Heads, who tend to be former teachers themselves, are caregivers while successful business people are "builders" and/or detail-oriented managers. School heads and boards need to find the "middle ground" in order to lead with vision AND sensitivity to the pace of change and the unique nature of school relationships.

Furthermore, at this School each of the Division Heads was "in tight" with his or her own faculty and parent group, but not in close coordination with one another on curriculum and other matters. **Effective coordination across divisions is lacking in many of our schools. Many division heads**



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run their own, almost feudal kingdoms with little or poor communications among divisions.

The leadership team unanimously supported the choice of the new Head, but none really believed that the strategic plan was viable or realistic. The senior management team HAD been included in strategic planning subcommittee meetings but felt compelled to support it due to the driving willpower and energy of the Committee Chair. **To be successful, strategic plans must have both board buy in and staff support.**

It was apparent to the new Head that he had to move fast enough on the strategic plan to satisfy the "engineer's" faction yet at the same time slowly enough so as not to antagonize the faculty and staff who neither knew nor trusted him yet. The faculty was aware that the prior Head had been "nudged" out the door. The new Head therefore walked into a culture that would have resented any replacement for the beloved (and perceived mistreated) predecessor. The Board wanted in the succeeding Head a "driver" who would guide the strategic plan. **Most search committees unconsciously hire a head with a polar opposite style from that of the prior one and furthermore do not understand the pitfalls of doing so.**

The Chair, while an advocate for, and a frequent writer on healthy board governance, had only shallow support on the Board for her leadership. She had made a few missteps in reading personalities and judging reactions of trustees. This power vacuum on the Board enabled the Planning Chair to gain support for replacing her as Board Chair. **Selecting a chair is second in importance only to selecting the head, and sometimes it is more important.**

The Head's middle school children were having difficulties adjusting to their new school. As their father began to implement the plan, teacher resistance led to inappropriate remarks in the classroom about the Head's leadership and initiatives. Some students began to tease the Head's children. **Difficult adjustments for the children and spouse of a new head are not unusual, especially if the head is seen as a change agent.**

The Head remained stoic about his goals and leadership even when confronted by a confluence of forces that made leading almost impossible.

Teachers became increasingly disgruntled as the Head moved on several new fronts which affected them directly: substantive teacher evaluation, curriculum mapping, and computer based communications between teachers and parents, all part of the strategic plan. **No one had given any thought to the nature, pace and number of changes on the table and how much this faculty culture could handle. This School needed a transition plan first and a strategic plan second.**

The combination of all these changes sparked some faculty leaders into action. By the beginning of the Head's second year, some teachers were speaking to students and parents directly about their



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unhappiness with the new Head and the emerging "cold and business like" expectations and atmosphere. They signaled that they might begin shopping around for other options. Even if these teachers (mostly senior ones) had no real viable alternatives, they successfully frightened parents into thinking that there might be a wholesale loss of key teachers. Such threats are common when a new head is hired, and uncomfortable changes begin to occur.

The Board told the Head that he was responsible for this backlash for having failed to build sufficient connections to parents, teachers and students. They urged him to attend even more games and events. He did, now having even less time for his family and their adjustments.

The concept of "transition" was totally foreign to the Search Committee and certainly the faculty. Thus, there had been no transition plan in place or the new head and his family to support him publicly and privately.

The Head strongly suggested a workshop on board governance. The Board reluctantly agreed, as the Chair was convinced not only that the Board was healthy but that it was a role model for other good schools.

The consultant conveyed a strong sense that the strategic plan was the root of the problem by virtue of its ambitious corporate nature; absence of faculty and staff buy in; Board insensitivity to the School's culture; and aggressive timetable. Compounding these problems was the lack of formal and informal transition support for the Head and his family. The consultant recommended that the strategic plan be put on hold for a year or two to allow the Head to understand better the tone of the faculty culture and how to operate within it successfully. It was also suggested that the Head should be allowed to put his own "stamp" on it.

The Board agreed to these suggestions verbally. Meanwhile, the resentment against the Chair's style had grown sufficiently powerful that a faction of the Board, meeting secretly, decided not to support her reelection and nominated another candidate instead. As expected, that was the "engineer." The Chair resigned. Back stage maneuvering by one faction or another to ensure the election of its candidate as chair is not unusual in some independent schools.

The new Chair tried to create ostensibly a working relationship with the Head while still insisting that he move expeditiously to carry out the strategic plan. The faculty continued to fear the new Head's agenda (as they understood it), and they were wary of the new Chair whom none had ever really known.

After the Head's third year, it was clear to him he would not clear the typical transition hurdles, and he began to search for other options before inevitably he was asked to leave. He was allowed to stay on long enough to implement some of the needed changes according to plan and to allow for an



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orderly search for a new Head. The Head has found another attractive opportunity.

Lacking a transition plan to follow the search, following an overly mechanistic strategic plan more suited to a business model and overlooking truly healthy governance practices, this School failed on several fronts. All of this could have been avoided.

This "trap" or a similar scenario could and does occur in many schools worldwide. In fact, this case has been repeated multiple times in multiple schools almost exactly as stated. These are the keys to avoiding it:

1. When launching a search, always lay simultaneously the groundwork for a transition plan. Whether or not the board establishes a formal transition committee, there must be a small group of mainly trustees who help ensure that in the head's first two or three years he or she avoids misreading the school culture.
2. Involve division heads in transition and in planning for any substantive change. Without their support, the head may not survive beyond his or her first three to five years, and change will meet with faculty opposition.
3. Do not impose a prior strategic plan upon any new head in which he or she has had no input.
4. It is advised strongly to undertake a strategic planning process at least two years before a head search OR two years after his or her arrival. Unless absolutely necessary, avoid either initiating or implementing this process in a head's first year. It is far better to devise instead an "entry plan" or a "transition plan" consisting of a short list of manageable politically sensitive goals for the first one to two years of the new head's tenure. Again ensure that these efforts are supported publicly and privately by the Board and a transition strategy which includes senior administrators.
5. In initiating a strategic plan, it is wise to be sensitive to the resistance of school and faculty cultures to the tools, jargon and measuring sticks normally used in the business and professional worlds. When a Head or Board hears or senses resistance either to the process or the elements of the plan, it is wise to step back and "take the temperature" of the school community. It is important to determine its source and the explanation for the pushback which is usually failure to be sensitive sufficiently to the school's unique culture and climate. It is critical to assess how much and what kind of change the culture will tolerate and how quickly and to adjust if necessary. Failure to pick up on warning signals such as those described above can lead to more than just the derailment of the strategic plan.
6. Communicate, communicate, and communicate. An absence of internal and external communications was evident at all points in this School's planning process. Communication builds support for decisions and mitigates fears which are so prevalent in school cultures that prefer predictability and the status quo in all aspects of school life.



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7. This consultant recommends assessing the school culture and ensuring some degree of constituent buy-in BEFORE beginning the process. One way is to have an outside facilitator conduct focus groups with parents, faculty and perhaps older students and alumni. This is one way to allow these groups to feel heard objectively without necessarily having them participate in the actual strategic planning workshop.
8. Healthy board governance is the foundation of all strategic plans, and it is achieved through effort. It does not exist just because the Board assumes it does. Governance requires training, preferably annually. Consider using an outsider to educate the board on "norms" of behavior in independent schools; the politics of process-oriented, slow-moving school cultures and the complexity of change in such a culture; and when and how to begin strategic planning.
9. Plan for healthy leadership succession. The tone and attitude of the board members toward the chair and each other as well as toward the head form a crucial element of healthy governance. Ensure first that the head transitions effectively and safely, ensure healthy board governance is in place, and only then launch a strategic planning process.

Having taken steps to avoid this "trap", what should be the key elements of any strategic plan for an independent or international school?

1. Establish **mission clarity** that resonates with all crucial constituencies. There should be a few key words upon which all agree that form the core statement defining the school's unique character and strengths. This is the starting point for all planning. If this clarity does not exist, then consider having a facilitator conduct a "visioning exercise" before the planning process begins.
2. Include within a healthy governance structure a strong Committee on Trustees (or Nominating Committee) that guarantees **institutional memory** on the board and the longevity of service of effective heads. A board without institutional memory becomes one in which trustees do not remember why the head was hired and what he was charged to do.
3. Develop a strategic long range **financial plan** that will guide how money is raised and spent to enhance and preserve the mission. This involves examining the trade offs in financial management. It is not possible, for example, to have low tuition, high faculty salaries, small class size and state-of-the art programs, plant and technology although that may represent the ideal, unless there is a massive endowment.
4. Understand potential future political, economic and legal challenges and **design appropriate contingency plans to meet them.**
5. Provide for healthy faculty cultures which includes designing a **salary philosophy, salary system and evaluation plan** that meets the strategic needs and mission and guarantees schools the ability to attract, retain and reward those who most reflect that mission.



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6. Develop a **communications and marketing plan** that attracts and retains students and **builds parent and alumni trust** in and support for the school.
7. Ensure that management is discussing innovative educational programs and **centers of excellence** that reflect mission and history, contribute to the bottom line, serve as a marketing tool AND convey relevance to the future.
8. **Manage risk** ranging from ensuring physical security for children at school; dealing with contagious disease; handling a scandal; reviewing policies regarding sexual harassment; and addressing school attitudes towards alternative lifestyles.
9. **Avoid financial and other conflicts of interest**, especially on the Board but even within the faculty and staff.

To create such a plan, the Board and the Head can employ a direct, "broadbrush" or a hybrid/blended approach. The more broadbrush the approach, i.e., the greater the involvement of other constituents outside of the Board, the more delicate the task and in some cases the riskier it becomes. The choice depends upon the culture, needs and stability of the school. Littleford & Associates can help you determine which is the best choice for your school.

Our Firm undertakes searches; transition planning for schools and boards; head compensation reviews to "land" a new head or to keep a current valued one; board governance training; mentoring boards in chair selection and transition planning; and strategic planning that fits the culture and needs of the school. Our services have the added dimension of providing the perspective of the "norm" in independent school trends and behaviors which helps the leadership of schools develop workable, politically sensitive approaches and solutions that will "stick".

John Littleford
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