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WHY HEADS ARE WARY OF EXECUTIVE SESSIONS

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This Consultant spoke recently to a new Head who followed an ousted Head and began making changes before creating sufficient political capital with constituents. The Board did not counsel him to back off until it was much too late. By that time a fairly strong-willed faculty had soured on the new Head and had begun doing end runs behind the Head to Board Members.

This was a perfect storm of the following events:

1. The Board hired a new Head very quickly and without clearly defining the traits, qualities and experience it was seeking in a head of school.
2. The Board fell into the common trap of choosing a Head who was the “polar opposite” of the prior one: a brilliant intellectual leader following a 25-year school Head who was effective and beloved but not necessarily a curriculum or “thought” leader.
3. The new Head had neither an entry plan nor a transition plan nor transition committee.
4. The Board saddled the new Head with too many goals when the most important one was simply to lay low, get to know people and build political good will.
5. The Board praised the Head for his bold curricular moves despite the fact that there were signs that the pace of change was too fast.

Parents began to complain to the Board Members that the new Head reacted defensively to criticism. Faculty said the same thing. The new Head’s strength was not building personal relationships or being a “hale fellow well met” kind of individual. Despite being extremely talented, he did not yet naturally have the skill sets of listening and relating to people who disagreed with him. To be fair to this Head, now in his second school headship, he learned from this experience and worked to cultivate those skills.

However, because the Board felt burned by the parent feedback, they began for the first time to go into executive session after every board meeting for 20 minutes to as long as two hours. The focus was the Head, his personality and his defensiveness. Conversation veered off into many criticisms about curricular initiatives that the Board had asked the Head to implement and had praised. The



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Head was not in the room to defend his actions.

The Chair almost never told the Head what happened in executive sessions and when the Head did ask, the response was short and vague. One day the Head heard Board Members speaking about the executive session content, and when they saw that the Head was listening, quickly changed the subject.

The Head now began to feel paranoid. What was happening in these executive sessions? Why did they last so long? Why was he not informed fully and on a timely basis about what was going on?

When this Head was terminated mid-year, the school hired an insider. They now decided not only to have executive session after every board meeting but after every single subcommittee meeting: Governance, Finance, Development, Planning, Facilities, etc. These committees consisted of members who were NOT on the board and in some cases, they comprised the majority. Thus the potential existed for the Head to be talked about and possibly criticized after each board and subcommittee meeting among a group of mostly non board parents.

The new Head is very uncomfortable about this. The Board's reaction is understandable if unfortunate. The Board agreed, after the Head described his frustration, that they would train the chairs and committee members not to talk about the Head in these sessions. This Consultant does not support putting nonparent board members on the governance (COT) or finance committees as extremely confidential conversations occur in those meetings. Non-board parents who are not trained and experienced in school governance, may be voting with their own wallet in setting tuition, for example.

This is executive session taken to the extreme. And if you think this could never happen at your school, you may be right. But it is a real possibility as board members come to see any form of executive session as corporate due diligence. Whereas that may be appropriate in the corporate world, this Consultant maintains that it is potentially dangerous in the school world.

To be upfront, Littleford & Associates does NOT support Executive Session on a regular basis. This undercuts heads' self-confidence and undermines trust with the Board. Heads almost always resent it unless a head has been around for so long and is so powerful and popular, there is very little to fear. For most other heads, especially those in their first five years or so, this is a very risky practice.

All boards need training in transition planning and in the appropriate use of executive session. This is especially important for boards with high chair and board member turnover. It takes only one or two members to advocate for an unhealthy pace of change for a new head or for inappropriate ways to measure his or her performance. This may include regular discussions behind closed doors and



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poorly handled 360 evaluations.

In a head's first few years BUILDING TRUST between the board and head is vital.