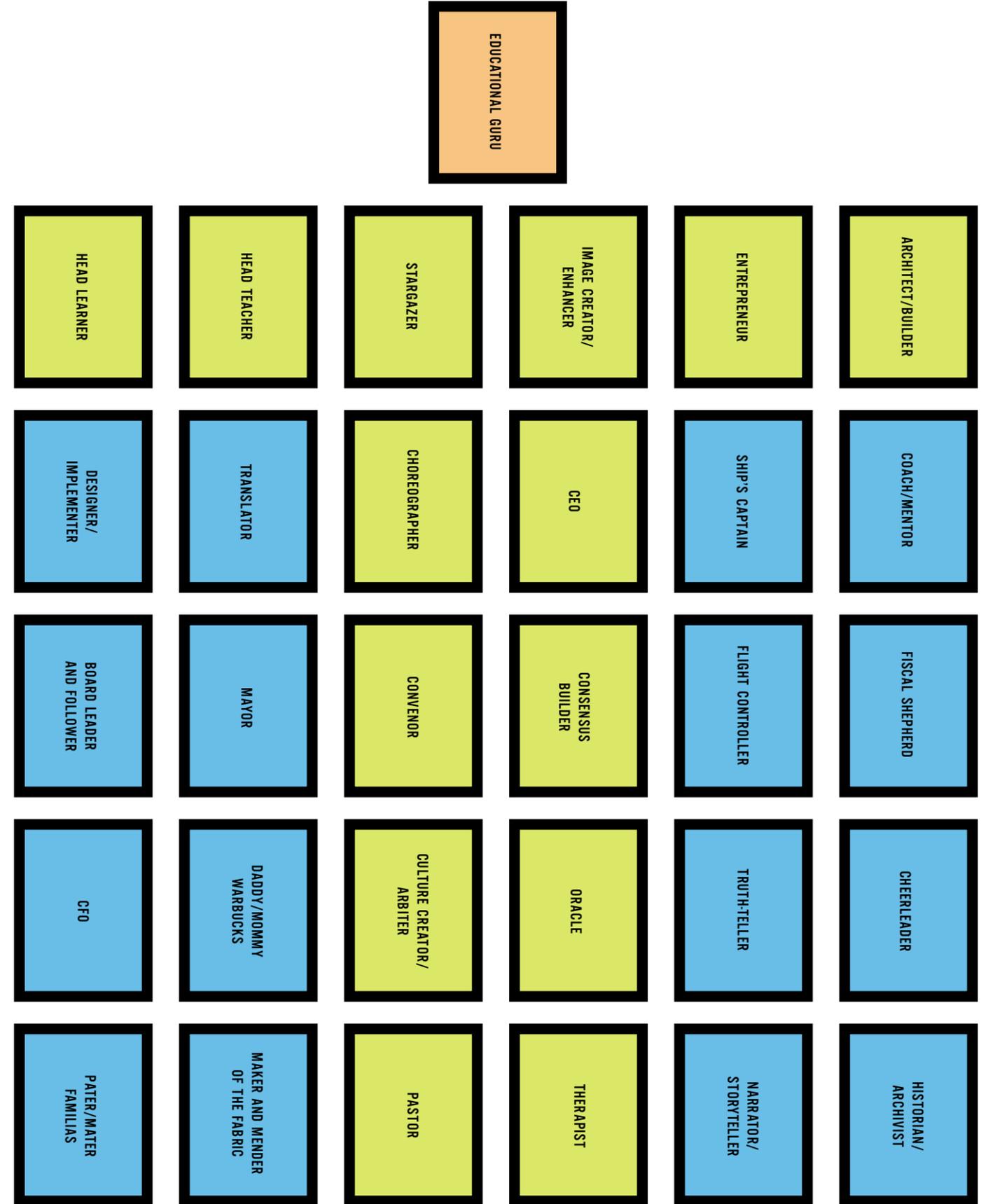


31

WINDOWS THE EVOLVING METAPHORS FOR HEADSHIP

MOST PEOPLE ASSOCIATED with independent schools believe they know what their head of school does, but, in reality, they can only know the head in a self-referential way — in relationship to their own positions within the community. Only other heads really understand the life of a head. Heads' spouses, board chairs, and leadership consultants understand a lot, but even they are privy to only segments of the arcane, layered, and shifting dimensions of the headship.

BY AL ADAMS



When I had the pleasure of serving on NAIS's Institute for New Heads faculty in the early 1990s, I was riveted by psychologist Ned Hallowell's story of a headmistress's retirement party following her 11-year tenure as head of school ("An Evening with Marianne Constant: The Head as a Transference Figure"). The chronicler conveys a dozen celebrants' perspectives on who Marianne has been to, and for, each of them. Surprisingly, the reader "sees" decidedly different visions — and versions — of Marianne. Hallowell concludes, "Other than her name, there seems to be nothing constant about her." He goes on to say, "The head becomes the focal point of many eyes, some eyes trusting, others plotting, some eyes demanding, others wanting to serve, some eyes endorsing, others desperately seeking praise. Peering through these many eyes, it can be hard to discern who the head really is.... Each of [the celebrants] created a Marianne Constant of [his or her] own. And she is none of these, in that each version derives from the subjective experience (and history, especially family history) of its creator.... Each version has in it bits of reality and bits of distortion.... The real Marianne? That hardly matters to the assembled group, for they each have their own Marianne."

In my experience, while such projections generally reside in constituents' subconscious, they are nevertheless present, powerful, often confusing, and sometimes maddening.

Projections and projectors' "baggage" aside, the fact is that the head's positional attributes, alone, readily serve as a Rorschach test for those whose lives the head touches. From a new head's perspective, the range of expectations within just the written job description can be baffling and even overwhelming. With time and experience, however, while the breadth of responsibilities doesn't narrow (it actually expands), the apparent randomness does begin to yield to some definable categories. Through my association with school heads over the years, especially facilitating leader-

ship workshops, I began to create and collect metaphors that would convey discernible aspects of the head's role. Admittedly the resulting recipe, ultimately over 50 "ingredients," strayed from the initial constraint of metaphor and came to include similes and even some straightforward, unvarnished descriptors. I recently distilled the list to 31 "windows" into the headship and grouped these into nine overarching roles. While the list does not pretend to be comprehensive, and there is obvious overlap between and among the images, it does begin to parse the complexity of the work that heads do.

THE METAPHORICAL ARCH OF HEADSHIP

In preparation for this article, I asked 50 long-tenured school heads, all of whom have been successful in leading their schools to bright new chapters, to complete an online survey, asking them to rank my nine "umbrella metaphors" in four ways:

1. the three roles you were *most compelled* to play in your *first years* as head;
2. the three roles you were *most comfortable* playing in your *first years* as head;
3. the three roles you have been *most compelled* to play during your *recent years* as head; and
4. the three roles that you are *currently most comfortable* playing as a head.

I am grateful that 40 quickly acceded to my request (see sidebar on page 79 for response summary).

My first observation about these responses is that each of the heads has been engaged in all of these roles throughout his or her respective career. Yet, it is clear that the degree of involvement, and the level of comfort with each, has varied, both within the group and over time. Of particular interest to me is the large number (70 percent) who were called to be educational leaders in their early years and the considerably smaller number (38 percent)

who find themselves playing that role in their later years. Not surprisingly, arguably in the vein of "use it or lose it," their comfort with being the "Educational Guru" has declined somewhat (79 percent to 68 percent). Similarly, I am struck by the apparent reduction in demand for their time as "CEO," "Mayor," and "Culture Creator" — suggesting, perhaps, that the ship has been on course in their later years, that fundamental philosophical questions and operational challenges have been addressed, and that they have largely delegated "sustaining duties" to someone on their administrative team. As one respondent commented, "I am now steering the ship, not walking the decks." However, it is worthy of note that, while their CEO comfort level has increased markedly, their Mayoral and Culture Creator "chops" appear to have noticeably declined (-26 percent; -12 percent, respectively).

It is no surprise, given the fiscal pressures on independent schools, in general, and the current state of the economy, in particular, that there is a 33 percent increase in the number of heads reporting that they now devote significant time to raising and managing money. If my experience is indicative, there has been a steady uptick in the related trend line throughout their tenures. At the same time, it is somewhat surprising that their comfort levels with finance and/or fund-raising have remained at the same moderate mark that they note for their inaugural years. It is also understandable that their role as the school's "Narrator/Storyteller" has moved to center stage for 79 percent of them, and that their comfort with this role has increased accordingly. This makes sense because long-term heads are expected to become the figurative embodiments of their schools, with the stories they tell and the grounded insights they share bathed in authenticity.

Apparently always comfortable with doing the "Stargazer/Vision Thing," these heads have experienced increasing need — and, one would assume, receptivity — for them to guide their communities in new, inspiring direc-

Apparently always comfortable with doing the "Stargazer/Vision Thing," these heads have experienced increasing need — and, one would assume, receptivity — for them to guide their communities in new, inspiring directions.

		Yr 1+	Yr 15+	+/-
1. Educational Guru	(compelled)	70%	38%	-32
	Head Learner (comfort)	79%	68%	-11
	Head Teacher			
2. Stargazer (visionary)	(compelled)	59%	74%	+15
	Image creator/enhancer (comfort)	67%	68%	+1
	Entrepreneur			
3. Architect/Builder	(compelled)	50%	68%	+18
	(designer/implementer) (comfort)	44%	50%	+6
	Translator: theory to reality Choreographer			
4. CEO	(compelled)	77%	68%	-11
	Ship's Captain (comfort)	59%	69%	+10
	Coach/Mentor Board Leader and Follower			
5. Mayor	(compelled)	58%	31%	-27
	Convener (comfort)	69%	43%	-26
	Consensus-Builder Flight Controller			
6. Fiscal Shepherd	(compelled)	46%	79%	+33
	CFO (\$ allocation as reflection of values) (comfort)	40%	42%	+2
	Daddy/Mommy Warbucks (rainmaker)			
7. Culture Creator/Arbiter	(compelled)	55%	40%	-15
	Oracle (meaning-maker) (comfort)	67%	55%	-12
	Truth Teller Cheerleader			
8. Pater/Mater Familias	(compelled)	50%	50%	-
	"Maker and Mender of the Fabric"* (comfort)	50%	50%	-
	Pastor Therapist			
9. Narrator/Storyteller	(compelled)	48%	79%	+31
	Public "face" and voice (comfort)	33%	62%	+29
	Historian/Archivist			
10. Other: school head as: chair of the complaint department, lighthouse (always present, solid, directional, source of light in the darkness), referee, shepherd, sheriff, bouncer (of some personnel), mentor (to colleagues), guide (to parents), lawyer				

*The phrase "Maker and Mender of the Fabric" comes from writer Peggy McIntosh.

tions. Heads, of course, do not have the luxury of simply dreaming big; they must live productively at the intersection of theory and practice. Thus, the Stargazer needs to be complemented by the "Architect/Builder," and it appears that these respective trajectories have largely mirrored one another in the survey results.

Given that we see "no change" in the "Pater/Mater Familias" role over time, it is tempting to gloss over this dimension here. However, for many heads, this role, more than any other, sneaks up on them over the years. Heads speak to me of this dimension being simultaneously demanding, rewarding, and draining, its general public invisibility notwithstanding. It also proves most often to be impossible to plan for and, by definition, it usually trumps other duties when it calls. This role constantly asks the head to be the glue that binds together an often fragile, sometimes flawed, occasionally fractious, and always insatiably needy community. Less continuously, but regularly, heads must also be prepared to provide pastoral or counseling services (one respondent added the term "grief counselor") to their adult "flock." It is worthy of note, I believe, that heads' "Maker and Mender of the Fabric" (a term borrowed from Peggy McIntosh) and "Pastoral" roles garner little press and receive even less preparation. And the latter, I have found, increases markedly over time. This is true, I presume, for two reasons: (1) with the passage of time, heads become known and trusted for who they are, as opposed to only their positional caricature; (2) gray hair does reflect longer life experience and, one would hope, a larger reservoir of wisdom. As one respondent said, "Somewhere along the way, I went from being smart to being wise."

While heads' roles have shifted over the last two decades in part because

of societal, economic, and political variables, I believe there is an equally strong, and more predictable, association with phases of the headship. In my 2002 *Independent School* article, "How To Keep Your Head," I developed one plausible construct of headship evolution. The three stages I put forward — the first two each generally spanning five to seven years — were

(1) the Stabilizing/Revising/Integrating Stage, (2) the Hitting Your Stride Stage and (3) the Reaping Rewards/Expanded Vision/Generative Stage. I now see that, were we to superimpose my colleagues' rankings of the Headship Metaphors on the Stages of the Headship, a number of correlations would be apparent. It makes sense, for instance, that the Stage 1 head would

need, especially, to attend to getting things ship-shape, beginning with the educational program, building community, and crystallizing, as well as providing language for, the school's culture. Similarly, it rings true that a more senior head will be positioned to tell the school's story in compelling ways, to shape an expanded vision, to raise more money, and to better align fiscal resources with the school's deep values.

THE COMMUNITY OF HEADS

My hope is that having a sense of these general role patterns will help the new generation of heads in at least three ways. First, they can suggest strategic lenses through which one can establish early-year priorities. Next, they underscore that, while a head must attend to all of these roles all of the time, there is no way to embrace them equally at any given moment. Third, these insights can assist new heads in anticipating which dimensions of headship come naturally to them and which pose more of a challenge and/or are not as much fun. Among other things, this understanding can suggest how best to build the newer head's administrative team and can point toward professional areas of growth that she or he needs to pursue.

In all of this, it is important for school heads to bear in mind that "timing is everything"; changing circumstances may well require that heads adapt their style and strategies in unanticipated ways. It is also critical to remember that little of the criticism that will inevitably come their way has much to do with who they are personally. Thus, Ned Hallowell admonishes that you "(1) don't take it personally, (2) remember that, in your role, you are bigger than life, and (3) try to know the other person's pain." Similarly, Marianne Constant's final pieces of advice are to "(1) keep your door open, (2) stay open, (3) let the people have access ('that's all they really want'), and (4) get your own self taken care of."

As I close, my thoughts return to the opening paragraph of this article,

which implies that the headship can be lonely. This is true, naturally, because of a head's positional power, which makes it difficult to develop authentic friendships within the school community. I know of some heads who have enjoyed success in this area, but because every relationship is, by definition, "loaded," most find it hard to do. However, loneliness also derives from others not understanding the exigencies and the nuances of a head's professional life. One successful antidote that I strongly recommend to fellow heads, for both personal support and professional growth, is the regular use of a leadership coach who serves as an objective confidante, sounding board, and informed guide. Another antidote that thrives in the San Francisco Bay Area is the construct of Heads' Dialogue Groups. These were originated in the mid-1990s by organizational systems consultant Debbie Freed (my "organizational coach/shrink" for the past 20 years) and myself. Freed currently facilitates four of these groups that convene roughly once a month. For those of us who participate, the dialogue group is a welcome and, at times, essential source of friendship, affirmation, and support. Between sessions, our figurative doors are open to one another. Beyond this regional model, I have found that the national brotherhood/sisterhood of school heads is real, dependable, and transportable. While generally unspoken, there is shared understanding that heads can confide in, and trust, one another. I have found this to be a wonderful thing.

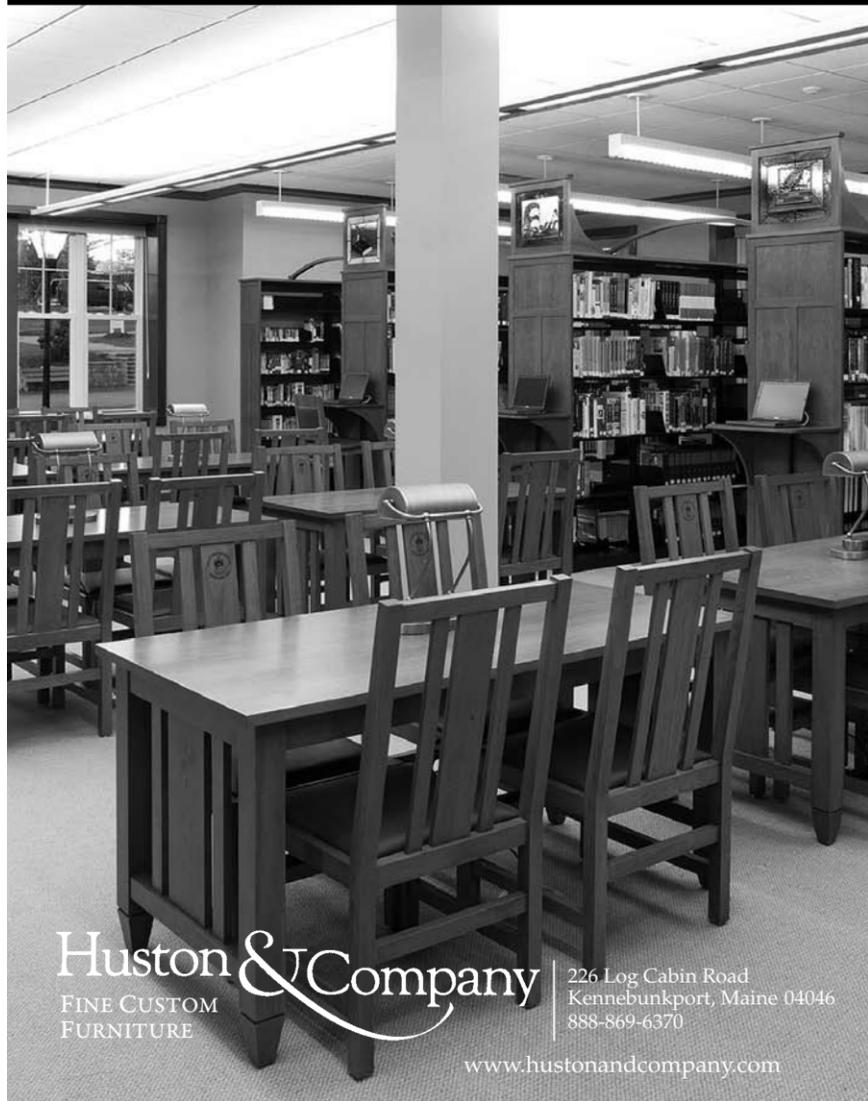
At the same time, it is often said that school heads make poor friends. If this is the case, it is primarily because of the incessant demands on heads' time and psychic energy. The reality is that everyone seems to want, and need, a piece of a school head, and private space is rare and fleeting. The other side of the coin, of course, is that it feels good to be needed! I therefore end on a cautionary note: while school heads can expect to garner fulfillment, respect, and, in the best of times, even adulation from their work, it is

critical for new heads to understand the importance of sustaining a robust network of family and friends that will be their abiding source of sustenance. Leading a school community to a new and elevated chapter is heady and seductively engaging stuff. However, school heads must strive for a sense of balance and proportion while "in the saddle." Even more, they need to recognize that, like Marianne Constant, their retirement dinner will ultimately come, and both they and "their" school will move on.

Al Adams, the head of Lick-Wilmerding School (California) for 23 years, writes often on issues in independent education, particularly in the areas of school leadership and the public purpose of private schools.

FINE ACADEMIC FURNITURE

*Dedicated to design and function.
Built on Maine integrity.*



Huston & Company
FINE CUSTOM
FURNITURE

226 Log Cabin Road
Kennebunkport, Maine 04046
888-869-6370

www.hustonandcompany.com

24/7 Online High School



National University Virtual High School offers a comprehensive online curriculum for students seeking to enhance their academic experience.

- More than 80 courses in all subject areas including Advanced Placement (AP®)
- Flexible scheduling that allows students to begin at any time
- Enroll in a few courses or earn a high school diploma
- Media-rich instructor-led courses
- Accredited by WASC and approved by NCAA and UC "a-g"
- Math and science course scholarships available

Learn more. Contact NUVHS at **866.366.8847** or visit www.nuvhs.org today!

©2010 National University System



**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL**
An affiliate of the National University System