

Entry: The Door to Effective Headship

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I have had the good fortune to experience two first years as a school head—the first, as I began my five-year tenure at the Cambridge School of Weston and the second, when I arrived at Lick-Wilmerding in 1988. As I approached each of these “new beginnings,” well-intentioned friends offered conventional advice: “Enjoy the honeymoon.” “Spend the first year listening.” Others, in contradiction, intoned, “Think of the first hundred days of the presidency; put yourself on the map early with dramatic initiatives.”

While these exhortations contained elements of wisdom, I instinctively knew that any, taken literally, was bad advice. My instincts were confirmed when, six months before moving to Weston, I was introduced to Barry Jentz and the book, *Entry*¹, which he co-authored with his partner, Joan Wofford. Written primarily for public school superintendents and principals, *Entry* suggested a fresh and dynamic process for assuming leadership at a new school—namely to enter, in equal measures, as anthropologist and proactive leader.

Convinced of the usefulness of such a public and formal “entry plan,” I present it each summer at the NAIS Institute For New Heads. Immediately, most of the new heads have an “aha” experience and speak of the relief they feel because *Entry* offers a practical solution to the conundrum with which they are struggling: how to start, and particularly, how to balance the need to listen and learn with the need to assert strong leadership. More importantly, most report at the year-end reunion that their entry plans produced just the results they had hoped for.

An underlying premise of *Entry* is that I, as the arriving head, am entering my new school with respect—that is, without preconceptions or pet prescriptions for what the school ought to become. Another is that it is not my school; instead my role is that of leader and steward for one important chapter in the school’s evolution, with connection, continuity and change being the threads which stitch together past, present and future. Another premise predated, but seemed to anticipate, Peter Senge’s notion of the “learning organization²,” with **inquiry, reflection and growth** being at the center of the enterprise. While Senge writes for the corporate world, what better cornerstones can there be for a school?

Entry also allows me, as the new head, to incorporate Lee Bolman’s and Terry Deal’s “four frames³,” through which to view an organization. Specifically, it provides the discipline to assure that I look equally through the structural, human resources, political and symbolic lenses. Further, the very act of modeling my respect for the community and my commitment to honest inquiry is a symbolic statement which can define my entire tenure at the school.

Four outcomes flow naturally from a successful entry process. The first is that *Entry* is not only a vehicle for understanding my new school but also for shaping it. Unlike a generalized commitment to “active listening,” *Entry* includes a formal process for feeding back to the community what I have learned and for testing and refining emerging hypotheses. Second is the critical importance of achieving a clearly articulated, shared vision for the school; this agreement on core values and language of discourse is the most concrete, short-term goal of *Entry*. The third is that *Entry* is the beginning of a formal and systematic planning process—one which informs the head’s, board’s and budget’s annual priorities, and ultimately, forms the foundation for the school’s strategic plan and accompanying financial long range plan. The fourth, in Senge-esque fashion, is that *Entry* represents a new (or, in rare circumstances, renewed) commitment to a continuous process of institutional and individual reflection and inquiry. Valid in any case, such a growth-oriented ethos enjoys even greater currency in today’s world of aging faculties in need of renewal.

It was five years ago this very week (early July) that I conducted my first *Entry* interview at Lick-Wilmerding. My public commitment was to spend an hour to hour-and-a-half with each board member and administrator prior to September, and with each faculty member before Thanksgiving. In addition, I would do the same with representative samples of parents, students and alumni/ae—mostly individually, but sometimes in small groups.

My introductory letter to the various constituencies included my reasons for undertaking this formal entry process, the timetable for feedback/validation sessions (late fall), a projection of planning steps which would follow this first phase of *Entry*, and the list of questions which would form the backbone of the semi-structured interview format I would use in our upcoming conversations. My letter spoke of the special opportunity I wanted to seize to fill-in the portrait of Lick which I was painting in my mind. It went on to say that, “I want to take advantage of this transitional moment—to capture the freshness of early insights, to appreciate the various angles of vision and to understand the issues which define Lick’s hopes and challenges for the future.”

Beyond communicating to the entire community what kinds of inquiries I would make in the interviews, inclusion of the questions with the introductory letter allowed interviewees to prepare answers, if they chose. Many, in fact, came with pages of notes, and a few even submitted well-developed papers. In addition to several inquiries about personal stories and points of connection with Lick, I also posed questions such as:

- What are the key issues facing Lick today? Why is each important? Can you rank these issues in priority order?
- What qualities do you most want to see preserved at Lick-Wilmerding?
- What networks of people are typically interested in influencing decision-making? What do the members of these networks have in common? How do they differ?
- Describe a moment when the school was in conflict. How did the conflict arise? What people or groups played roles in it? How? How was the problem resolved? Might it have been handled differently?

- Describe a difficult decision you have had to make as a (board member). Why was it important? How did you reach your decision? What did others think? Would you, in retrospect, have done anything differently?

The public nature of the plan was, in itself, a powerful statement to the community about how I intended to do business. In addition to signaling an open and inclusive leadership style, my questions reflected the seriousness, breadth and depth which would characterize my initial inquiries, as well as my ongoing approach to leadership at Lick.

Certainly one immediate and pragmatic result of announcing my *Entry* intentions was that every “key player” was assured of equal access to “my ear.” This notion of establishing a “level playing field” right from the start has paid significant dividends throughout these five years. On the more personal, less political side, nothing convinces people of your genuine interest in them better than focused, uninterrupted one-on-one time. Amazingly, I can think of a dozen examples from the academic year just past when one colleague or another made reference to our initial conversation five years ago! The impact of those first six months’ of making personal and substantive connections not only set the stage for our community’s work together, but has endured in dramatic and surprising ways.

The explicit purpose of *Entry* is to identify prevalent themes which define the school of today, including any major challenges which require attention. The new head’s immersion as a participant-observer in the school’s culture (with intensive reading and observation supplementing the interviews) puts him/her on a fast track to understanding. In many cases it is recurring stories, rather than specific information, which provide the deepest insights. In addition to learning about themes and challenges, the new head also begins to learn about the personal and political forces at play as he/she begins to fashion strategies for moving the school forward.

The real power of *Entry* is that it puts the new head in a position to say, in effect, to each constituency: “Here is what you (in the aggregate, since all individual perspectives are confidential) have told me. Did I get it right? Given these insights and perspectives, here is how I believe we should proceed.” The resulting opportunity to continually refer to “what you have told me” and “my understanding of how you view it” allows the head to enjoy many of the benefits of being a consultant—that is, to take the high road, while also being the most central participant.

A magical moment in my entry to Lick came in late August of that first summer, when the board joined us for a working session at our faculty retreat. The goal was to individually, then in small groups, and last as a whole group, write a one paragraph mission statement for the school. Having achieved that, we pushed to the next level of distilling the essence of the “ideal Lick” into short metaphorical banners or mottoes. The central issues and descriptive language which emerged came directly out of the first two months of *Entry* interviews! What is more, those foundations: **“EDUCATION FOR THE HEAD, HEART, HANDS,” “PRIVATE SCHOOL WITH PUBLIC PURPOSE,” “CAN-DO CONFIDENCE”** have resonated with every constituency,

including alums from the teens and twenties, with whom I have met over these five years. They also became the central elements of the strategic plan and financial long range plan which we developed over the next two years. In a very literal way the issues, ideas and language which bubbled-up in the entry process have become Lick-Wilmerding's anchor—the summation of past virtues, present achievements and future dreams.

A final premise underlying the theory of *Entry* is that it represents the beginning of a systematic, ongoing planning process. Thus, at the end of my first year at Lick, with *Entry* wrapped in tidy bows, we had Susan Stone facilitate the beginning of a full review of the school's strategic plan—goals, rationales and implementation steps for all 12v components of an independent school⁴. The process which followed unfolded over the next eight months, and we published a 24- page document which included a financial long range plan, with five-year projections. Over the next year, we developed a much more extensive and sophisticated financial long range plan which has attracted significant interest from other schools.

These steps are relevant in the context of *Entry* because the fundamental building blocks: quality of program (top salaries and benefits), full integration of the technical arts (shops) into the rigorous college prep curriculum, access and affordability (to assure that students of color and students paying “flexible tuition” represent at least a third of the school), surfaced and were crystallized in those first six months. They became a credo of sorts—a regular expression and affirmation of our shared values. As such, they serve as both prod and measuring stick, and their enduring effectiveness derives from the knowledge that they truly have their roots in the soul of the whole community.

1. *Entry*, Jentz, Barry; Wofford, Joan, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1981
2. *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge, Peter, Doubleday, New York, 1990
3. *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman, Lee; Deal, Terrence, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991
4. *Strategic Planning For Independent Schools*, Stone, Susan, National Association of Independent Schools, Boston, 1987

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