

How to Keep Your Head: Great Schools and Long-Term Headship

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Given my many years of rubbing elbows with school heads and boards of trustees, I am convinced that the long-held conventional wisdom advising schools to change heads every ten years or less, for the sake of “new blood,” has always been bad advice. It is even more wrongheaded today. Instead, I believe that an independent school’s board of trustees should make the hiring, support, and retention of a long-term head one of its top and enduring priorities.

Experience shows that schools with effective, long-term heads thrive, while those with more frequent head turnover, progress, at best, by fits and starts or, at worst, flounder.

When it comes to the length of the head’s tenure, there is a great deal at stake for a school. Given these high stakes, I urge heads and trustees to think in a disciplined and proactive way about “stages of the headship” that can chart the course to a long tenure—for long tenure is more likely to occur by design than by chance.

I also believe it is essential that school heads think of themselves as their school’s “model learner.” Leadership specialist Peter Sengé has helped me to understand that vital organizations, like their leaders and members, will thrive in the long term only if they are committed to (1) authentic inquiry, (2) reflection and (3) growth. I argue, then, that the “new blood” that a school seeks is best found coursing through the body, brain and psyche of a highly evolved, learning and growing school head at successive stages of his or her career.

What Is at Stake for the School?

Schools with long-term heads generally exhibit healthy growth and thoughtful, intentional change within a stable environment. By contrast, revolving-door headships portend uncertainty, stagnation and, often, loss of enrollment and revenue. Therefore, it is clear to me that an independent school is at its most vulnerable when it faces a head transition.

A change of heads poses a potential grave threat to a school, in part because head searches themselves are far from fail-safe. There is, in fact, high risk at every turn: divining the health and priorities of the school, plumbing the depths of shared vision and community agreement on what is needed in the new head, the composition of the search committee and its related vested interests, the correlation between the school’s self-image and its public identity, the choice of search consultant, the available pool of candidates at a given moment in time and the timetable in relation to other simultaneous head searches drawing on the same pool of candidates.

Equally worrisome is the fact that the skills and qualities it takes to win a head search “sweepstakes” are not necessarily the skills and qualities it takes to be a good school head. And then, of course, there is the underlying variable of the degree of elegance of the match between a school’s history/culture and the new head’s values, interests and ways of being. Sadly, examples of esteemed, successful heads from one venue flailing

and failing in a new school are legion. In addition to these considerations, the time lost during the transition, including the last year or two of the previous head's tenure, and often a year of interim headship, add up to three or more years of "transition time" whenever the headship changes.

Once the new head is chosen, more time is lost as the new head adjusts to the school constituencies and culture, and as the school adjusts to the head. Generally, it takes an entering head at least two years to build strong working relationships with faculty and staff. In schools that have previously suffered contentious or divisive relationships, the time required to build trust can be much longer. Similarly, it can easily take five years, or more, for the new head to successfully link with alumni and friends of the school and to begin to be viewed as the embodiment of the school's philosophy, history and culture. The first chapter of a head's tenure, then, represents a major investment by the school. To throw that investment to the winds as it is beginning to pay dividends for the sake of "new blood" simply makes no rational sense.

Stages of the Headship

I have developed one conception of the stages of the headship, as I have experienced them during my 18 years as a head, and as I have heard them described by head colleagues over the years. My intention is not to be doctrinaire about the precise length of these stages, but, instead, to suggest a progression that generally applies to the chapters of a head's tenure.

I think of the first stage, often five to seven years, as the **Stabilizing/**

Revising/Integrating Stage. Whether inheriting a "fixer-upper" school or one that is running well, the new head must usually attend to visioning or re-visioning, upgrading or fine-tuning operational systems, shaping the faculty, staff and administrative team, building the board and creating or strengthening the development structure. In sum, whether faced with the need for a major overhaul or simply integrating oneself into a smoothly running, happy school culture, this is a chapter when the new head must attend to his or her knitting. The focus during this period is primarily internal—making sure that "the trains are running on time." One might also think of this as the foundation-building stage, without which successive stages cannot occur.

Stage II, in the five to ten year range, is the **Hitting Your Stride and/or Reaping Rewards Stage.** Assuming that the foundation is now solid, the head finds him/herself operating from a position of increased confidence and strength. No longer feeling tentative, apologetic or on the defensive (because of the reclamation projects that may have been in progress during Stage I), the head is able to expand his or her agenda and to be more assertive about making it happen. Simultaneously, the head's increasing stature in both the internal and external communities serves to naturally propel him/her into new arenas, including those of capital campaigns and leadership roles in the larger community.

Stage III is the **Expanded Vision/Generative Stage.** At its best, this is a time when the school is running well. It is financially stable, the administrative structure is optimally flat and effective,

and both the board and head are playing at the top of their respective games. In such a circumstance, the head is positioned to capitalize on the wisdom, networks and various forms of leverage that have accrued over the years. One result is what I, being from California, might call the “Zen of leadership.”

No longer feeling in any way “on the make,” as can be the case in the early years, the head’s and the school’s good health and self-assurance are subtly conveyed to others, and good things simply start coming the school’s way. This is not to suggest that this is a time to become complacent about the quality of the school’s programs and operations; without this firm foundation, other initiatives are not feasible. But it is a time when the head and the school have accumulated sufficient literal and figurative capital to be able to safely and productively extend themselves beyond former boundaries. In my case, my third stage has enabled my school, Lick-Wilmerding, to greatly expand its public purpose commitments and to simultaneously embark on an ambitious endowment and building campaign. Neither of these initiatives would have been conceivable in either Stage I or Stage II of my leadership here.

How to Keep Your Head

I offer what I believe are five essential ingredients to a board of trustees’ recipe to increase the likelihood of a lengthy headship.

Compensation

It is critical that the board establish an explicit and predictable process for creating and renewing the head’s contract. Over and over, I hear school heads bemoan the fact that attention to

their contract has simply fallen through the cracks. In most cases, this occurs because other more pressing issues demand the board president’s time or because he/she is not clear about how to proceed.

The resulting embarrassment for the head (“Would you attend to my contract, please, sir?”) and the variety of symbolic messages that might be inferred can be damaging to the board/head relationship. In addition, it is a “given” that heads generally do better, from a compensation perspective, when they change schools than when they remain in one place. It is thus very important that a board be aggressive about ensuring that the head’s contract terms remain competitive over time.

I have also found that an executive-compensation consultant can decompress the process and add valuable perspective in developing the head’s contract. The time has long passed since it was sufficient for the president of one board to call his or her counterpart across town to ask, “How much are you going to pay yours next year?” Today, heads’ compensation packages are complex—often including housing, cars, club memberships, split-dollar life insurance policies, deferred compensation instruments, etc. A good compensation expert will inform the board and the head about the full menu of options and related tax and legal considerations.

Equally important, such a consultant can offer national, and even international, comparisons for heads of comparable experience and circumstance. This is important information because, in most cases, if a school loses its head it will

more likely be to a locale across the country than across town.

Over the past decade, head sabbaticals, typically for six months, have become increasingly common. I applaud this trend for a number of reasons (for more details, see my article, “Sabbatical: A Good Idea and a Sound Investment,” *Independent School*, Fall 1998):

- The head can literally be revitalized for the next chapter of his or her leadership.
- The symbolic message to the school community—that the board is committed to the head’s enduring tenure—is powerful.
- The approach of the sabbatical is a strong incentive for the board to establish an effective head’s evaluation process.
- There is also a related incentive for the head to flatten his/her administrative structure—moving beyond the “school head as super hero” model—to ensure that things will run smoothly in his or her absence.
- The sabbatical is an effective vehicle for marking a shift in the head’s job description upon his or her return—often to devote time to a capital campaign or a strategic-planning initiative.

Finally, it is important for the board to think creatively about how to assist the head in preparing to retire with dignity, beyond mere financial considerations. In some cases, this can mean connecting the head with for-profit or major nonprofit boards as a way of softening his or her landing upon retirement. At the very least, it includes moving expenses when the head retires. Long-time school head Dick Barter tells the

poignant story of the 25-year head, who is seen loading a U-Haul to limp out of town as his 40-year-old successor is moved in style, in addition to making a larger salary than the retiring head. This is the stuff of which heads’ nightmares are made.

Evaluation

It is vitally important that an evaluative process be implemented that is mutually agreed to by both head and board, that it occur annually or biannually, and include, as its centerpiece, the progress made toward meeting written goals. These goals should be formulated each year from the strategic plan and current needs of the school and should include a clear description of how each goal will be reached and who has lead responsibility. In addition, an effective evaluative instrument can include more subjective criteria, such as the head’s leadership of staff.

First-Rate Administration

There is an adage that “first-rate leaders hire first-rate people, and second-rate leaders hire third-rate people.” However, the first prerequisite to hiring first-rate people is for a head to have the budget to do so. The board can help in this area by encouraging the head to think in this way from the very start. One benefit, of course, is that the head is then able to develop healthy delegation patterns. Another is that the head will continually be stimulated by colleagues who are his or her equals.

I remember Bob Sandoe (former school head and founder of the Carney Sandoe Placement Agency) telling me, when I first became a school head: “Don’t forget that the most important thing the school is paying you for is to think! If

you don't build in time in your schedule to think, you won't be doing your job." One of the great benefits of having a superior administrative team is that the head will dare to block out time to think.

As the challenge of running schools becomes more and more complex, many feel that the job is undoable for a single person. One indicator of this concern is that the pool of independent-school teachers and administrators who aspire to become school heads has dried-up considerably. Educators who might easily have seen themselves on the "head track" ten or 15 years ago are now saying things like, "I watch my school head, and he/she virtually has no life outside of being a head." As a result, some schools, such as mine (where a new associate head position has been created between the role of the head and the assistant head), are finding ways to strategically refashion the head's job by sharing portions with other administrators. Without a first-rate administrative team, this would not be an option.

In addition to freeing and energizing the head, an excellent administrative team also increases the likelihood that the school will enjoy a smooth leadership transition when the head does leave. As well, the complexity of modern independent schools all but mandates a flattened organizational structure and contemporary leadership style and therefore makes a given school less dependent on the singular leadership of the head. This greatly increases the likelihood of a new head's success.

Finally, the sharing of power and authority at all levels of a school's leadership enhances faculty and

administrative morale, as people are able to envision and experience more direct inclusion in the decision-making structure of the school.

Board Demands on the Head's Time

Boards of trustees seldom step back and assess their demands on the head's time and energy. When asked how much of their professional time is devoted to board interactions (both actual board work and the "care and feeding" of the board), heads generally report around 25-30 percent. However, some consultants suggest that heads who fail to allocate up to 50 percent of their time to their board work are walking on thin ice. Most trustees, on the other hand, are surprised to hear a 25 percent number and downright shocked to hear anything higher than that. A common trustee response when this reality is brought to light is, "But our purpose is to assist the head and make his or her life easier, not to add to his or her burdens!"

My purpose here is not to diminish the importance of the trustee/head relationship. In fact, I am the first to acknowledge that the head and board must, legitimately, spend a good deal of time attending to their relationship and working together on behalf of the school. However, as the business of running schools becomes ever more complex, and institutional aspirations ever more lofty, I do suggest that a board of trustees take a dispassionate look at the various ways in which it intersects with its head with an eye toward finding creative ways to reduce its demands.

One area to consider is simply the size of the board, recognizing that, to be effective, the head must form and sustain a personal relationship with every board

member. The time difference required, as an example, to stay in touch with 20 rather than 25 trustees is not insignificant.

It is also worth thinking about the number of committees that the board spawns, the number that requires the head's regular attention and attendance and the frequency of meetings. A partial solution to this challenge, of course, relates to the nature of the administrative team the head has established and the extent to which other administrators can "staff" various trustee committees. In addition, I suggest that committees meet only when they have work to do, rather than gathering on a regular basis, sometimes in search of an agenda.

Next, many boards today are adjusting their annual calendars so that they have fewer full meetings each year. Often trustees are unaware of the extraordinary amount of time the administration and staff must devote to board-meeting preparation. Thus, the elimination of one three-hour monthly meeting can translate into as much as ten to 20 hours of staff preparation time.

While my focus at this juncture is on ways to preserve your head and his or her administration, I also want to underscore the importance of using trustees' time as efficiently as possible. Recognizing that trustees offer the most precious gift they have, their time, for the benefit of the school, it is incumbent on the board leadership and the head to use that time as thoughtfully and intentionally as possible. And, as is frequently the case, less can easily be more, and high-level policy deliberations are much more stimulating than wrestling with minor details.

My next suggestion, an admonition if truth be told, addresses a host of issues beyond the consideration of the head's time. That is, to religiously attend to the roles and boundaries that separate headship from trusteeship.

Micromanaging trustees can be the death of a head, as he/she will predictably feel undermined, embattled, and disempowered. The corollary is that trustees who are dabbling in administration and implementation are neither working at a sufficiently high level, nor using their time well. My board has found what we call the "Chait Chart" enormously useful in continually monitoring whether we (board members and I) are beginning to step on one another's toes. The chart, entitled "Focus of Board's Attention," appears on page 111 of *The Effective Board of Trustees*, by Richard P. Chait et al. (Oryx Press), and acknowledges the "gray area" between the board's role of setting policy and the administration's role of implementing policies.

The Chait Chart places "major policy" in the upper left-hand quadrant of a matrix and demonstrates that a board whose time and effort are devoted outside of that quadrant, to any large degree, is probably not doing its job and is intruding on administrative turf. The Lick-Wilmerding board periodically maps its year's activities on this chart for an objective analysis of whether its and the administration's roles and boundaries maintain their integrity.

Last, it is important to acknowledge the potentially destructive impact of high-maintenance trustees. This is often a trustee who, generally with the best of intentions, devotes an unusual amount of time to his or her board work. One result

is that he or she subtly, or not so subtly, commands attention and exerts influence that is disproportionate relative to that of other trustees.

Another definition of “high maintenance” can be a “Johnnie One Note” trustee who brings a myopic perspective to board discussion because of a pet issue that he/she cannot relinquish. A third definition is the trustee who acts as a “Lone Ranger” by regularly asking staff (especially the business manager, development director or admissions director) to research or produce “this or that” outside of the legitimate board committee process. Often such trustees do not recognize the power of their position and think that saying “if you have time” gives the administrator discretion. The reality, of course, is that staff members normally spring into action when any trustee makes a request.

Clarity, then, about the board’s role and working priorities is essential to the effective deployment of a head’s time and energy. Ambiguity predictably leads to inefficiency and, ultimately, to diminished head morale and potentially explosive tension in the trustee/head relationship.

Organizational Consultant

Throughout my years as a head, I have regularly employed an organizational consultant to work with me on my leadership style and with my administrative team on our strategic priorities and the dynamic of our working relationship. On occasion, I have also invited her to work with my board chair and me, as well as with other key trustee committees or task forces. Such a consultant can be of enormous

help to a head, first, by encouraging him/her to keep moving up the learning curve. This is critical because a school head should be considered a “head learner,” with ongoing learning and growth as essential components of effective leadership.

In addition, by virtue of the consultant being a skilled facilitator, the head is free to participate in the administrative team’s reflections without the burden of having to lead the group during such conversations. Further, the consultant, because he or she works with a wide range of schools and heads, often helps to inform and expand the thinking of the head and the administrative team by providing outside experience and perspectives.

Lastly, the consultant can play the role of the head’s “organizational shrink” by supporting the head in his or her professional and personal journey and by helping to “take the temperature” and guide strategic decisions about the evolution of the school’s culture.

The Third Chapter: An Expanded Vision

A basic premise in my conception of the stages of the headship is that the head requires ongoing opportunities to learn, to grow, and to expand his or her horizons. As described in my Stage III of headship, after a decade or so, most heads are ready and able to extend their leadership into fresh areas. Often a new round of strategic planning, a new building project, and/or a new and larger capital campaign fully engage the head’s passion and energy at this time.

However, many heads yearn at this stage in their lives and careers to use more of

what and who they know for the betterment of the larger community. In my case, my trustees have institutionalized a commitment that ours is a “private school with a public purpose.” In order to make this ideal a reality, they have given me a mandate (permission, really) to devote up to 20 percent of my time to public service initiatives. While this level of commitment is unusual today, more and more heads and boards are exploring ways to become similarly involved. And, increasingly, senior heads are viewing such opportunities as just the inspiration they need to remain energized for their remaining chapter of headship.

Eschew Conventional Wisdom

In short, independent school heads, trustees and head-search consultants

should eschew the tried and (too often) untrue assumption that schools benefit from head turnover every decade or so. As I hope I’ve demonstrated, there is a great deal at stake for a school, as well as for a head, when a head transition occurs. A paramount object for every independent-school board of trustees should be to hire, support, evaluate and sustain the very best head they can, for as long as they can—assuming that the head continues to learn, to grow and to lead the school in an energetic, inspired and inspiring way. Schools that succeed at this goal generally thrive; others, at best, progress in fits and starts and, at worst, flounder, to the detriment of today’s students and those of future generations.