

THE CHANGING ROLE OF HEADS AND BOARDS after more than a decade of facilitating Head's Dialogue Groups

First of all, I want to thank all of the Heads who have participated in these groups for so many years. They have been my inspiration and portal into the thoughts, hearts and minds of those leading schools. I am grateful for their trust, tenacity and honesty.

Since the mid-90's, I have had 3 dialogue groups running, meeting once a month for the school year, with the average of 30+ heads attending. Many have stayed in the groups for their duration.

The purpose of the groups is professional support, recognizing the subtle intersection of understanding self as one steers an organization, especially one that is mission-driven.

Ultimately, heads report that these groups provide mutual support and insight, and are places that offer a safe harbor, recognizing that the headship can not only be quite stressful, but lonely. Spouses and loved ones are limited, often, and realistically so, in how much they want to hear the interior workings of a head of school's mind...and after all, isn't there more to life than just leading one's school?

Not necessarily.

Today, I am going to share some observations I have made over these years regarding the "*changing roles of heads and boards*". My emphasis is strengthening the relationship between the head and the Board, the critical leadership *partnership* in the school.

I am looking forward to the Q and A at the end to have a chance to hear from the collected group here, who are doing the yeoman's work of running schools.

Before I share my observations with you, I would like to say something about my underlying assumptions related to leadership.

My premise is that the role of the head is informed by the culture, and largely determined by the Board. Ideally, schools are led by the dialectic between head and board, and it is a true *partnership*.

In fact, NAIS provides a yearly conference in Chicago in the fall entitled "*Leadership through Partnership*". The name says it all.

However, truly creating such a partnership is hard to come by. Trustees and heads are incredibly well intentioned, but the challenges are many in building and living such a partnership. And perhaps more today than ever.

“*Cultures draw leaders they deserve*”:

Schools are cottage industries, and each is as unique as it is similar.

Cultures are defined by their foundings, key events across time, attitudes and behaviors, artifacts and rituals, core values, etc. It is not difficult for an outsider to observe culture, especially one trained in “organizational development”, as Peter Drucker says, “cultural anthropologists”.

There are always synergies between those who lead organizations and the cultures they choose to lead. In terms of schools, what I am saying is that at any given time, even when things are the most dysfunctional, you can make sense of how the culture gave rise to the leadership, and even why and how the leaders chose to be part of the school at that time. The opposite is also true.

There is also no coincidence when things are going pretty well, even very well.....how leaders emerge who somehow are just the right folks to steer the ship at that very time.

Barack Obama may be an example of this. As was George Bush.

Let me give you some school examples:

- 1) *This economic crisis*: do you have a head who understands the full range of the issues (within reason), or at a minimum has created and is working with the Board and Administration, finding effective ways to navigate the crisis? Is the Finance Committee doing its job? How capable is the Finance Chair? Board Chair? Is the Administration helpful in sorting through the realities of what needs to be done? And doing so?

Do you know/wonder how things got to where they are? (good, bad, indifferent)

- 2) Why do some schools have *constant turnover* of heads, or key administrators? Or, have difficulty in drawing capable and mature trustees to the Board? Or need to constantly beg trustees not only to serve, but to be part of the executive leadership? And why do others have deep benches of leadership, with many others hoping to be selected as part of that Board?
- 3) Did you ever notice that after a Board or school has had a leader who has appeared more warm and fuzzy than cooler and removed...the next leader is just the opposite? And what about the influence of *the times* in which one chooses to lead...ie. those of abundance vs. those of scarcity; times of crisis vs. stability, etc.
- 4) And, how can it be that some of us find that “wherever we go, there we are?” in others words, it is interesting how we can sometimes find ourselves ending up in the best of places, or the worst...or the best of relationships, or the worst...the best of Boards, the worst”...”wherever we go, there we are.”

There are always ways of making sense of why things are the way they are.....based on *history, culture and leadership*.

I am going to share my overall observations of the changing role of heads and boards today, but do keep in mind that each of you is leading your unique cottage industry, and the choices you make as leaders reflect not only the context in which it exists, but the school's culture, and your own. It is always helpful to be reflective and relentless in understanding these influences as you each make your important contributions to the schools you lead.

MY OBSERVATIONS:

1) *Schools are asked to be all things to all people, more today than ever.*

We all know this phenomenon, and for ages schools have been central communities in students and family lives. However, with the external pressures of the world today, and the limited resources of family and society, schools are facing even more of these expectations than ever. Especially independent schools.

One of the core competencies of effective leaders is to “manage assumptions and expectations”. In terms of being all things to all people, it begins with the Mission Statement. Think about yours.

Does it say something along the lines of meeting the needs of the whole child, developing creative, caring and critical thinking learners, not just for today but for a lifetime; preparing them to face their global green futures, 21st century, and along the way, become leaders and innovators in their own right...and supporting them with enlightened teachers and adults who model and practice these behaviors as well?

Missions reflect core values, and certainly these are all valuable. But in the daily practice of trying to actually create these environments for adults and children, do we promise more than we can actually deliver?

How do these Missions actually affect the adults who are in the trenches, trying to meet those expectations? And what is the role of family in partnering with schools to provide the same sets of values?

For today's discussion, what is the role of the Board and Head in leading and living these values?

When, truly, is less more.....and when is enough enough? And who calls that?

2) *Heads are asked to be all things to all people .*

The era of Mr. Chips is long gone. There was a time, good or bad, when heads were the ultimate authority, in fact, not only ran the workings of the school itself, but in reality were also in charge of the Board.

This model worked, and is an example of how the times inform one's reality, and I am certain if you asked folks who attended independent schools many years ago, they would report that "those were the good old days".

However, schools were quite different then, and the membership that made up independent schools quite different. There is an increasing desire among parents who never themselves attended independent schools to send their children to them. Much of this comes out of what has been a prosperous economy in the climate of failing public schools.

As a result, independent schools today are far more inclusive, diverse, accountable, and subject to the pressures of an ever-changing world in ways the former schools were insulated and rarified.

Many would say this is all to the good.

You can imagine, and of course know quite well, how the headship has adapted to these shifts. The headship has changed dramatically from the Frank Boyden days of leading Deerfield for 66 years; and, many of these changes started in the years of his retirement, the late 1960's.

We can analyze this though the lens of history, hippies, yuppies, boomers, generation x y and zers...but I would like to focus on the last 15 or so years.

I think we are in the middle of a major transition in how heads lead, their role and authority, and how they are held accountable.

It is always more difficult to "cross the bridge as you are building it", and , in fact, that is what I think is occurring. The preponderance of heads who are over 50 came into the profession probably thinking they would be more akin with Frank Boyden than Jack Welch or Bill Gates. In fact, if you told heads in those days that they would be viewed more as CEO's than educational leaders, the concepts most likely would not even have registered in their vocabularies.

Many baby boomers entered the educational arena in the late 60's, early 70's, out of the Vietnam era, as a way to avoid the war, but also out of an idealism of that era. Many heads I know see their work as a "calling".

These are the heads who NAIS now says will be retiring in droves over the next several years. That is, unless they are fired or marginalized enough to quit earlier!

And why is that? Because the rules of the game have shifted... and the expectations of their leadership are quite different. They are asked now not only to be educational leaders, but financial wizards and talented fundraisers. To not only be the *one* employee of the Board, but also to lead the Board from behind the scenes (some statistics say that heads today are asked to spend upwards of 40-60 percent of their time on Board business. Think about that..it translates to 2-3 days of a work week).

They are also asked to build buildings and grow people. To be a project manager and site developer. A politician who can work the local town officials and ordinances. To know all of the children's names, today's and every alum that walked the halls of the school...and their families.

To be an excellent communicator, not only spoken, but on paper and through the varied technologies, as well. Which means many are asked to answer everyone who writes to them, say through email or text messages, and not just by tomorrow, but in minutes.

To be *visionaries* and great managers, know how to delegate *and* control, knowing the "buck always stops here". To show up to every sports game, student show and parent assembly. To have an excellent evaluation system of teachers and staff, with proven measures of success and standards of excellence. To be clear, direct, and yet pastoral. To continue to learn and develop themselves, finding ways to enhance their leadership and communication.

Some even teach.

And, in the face of this, many Boards admonish their heads when they are not living balanced lives :-)

Are some heads thriving in these environments? Yes. But at what cost?

3) *Schools have had to recognize that they are businesses.*

They always have been, there certainly is a financial bottom line, but in this era of transparency and accountability, within this climate of diminishing resources, schools have no choice but to become viable and sustainable businesses.

The conundrum is that schools are not in the business of making widgets. Teaching and developing students is not easily measurable, no matter how many matrices and deliverables we ask for...

In this age of accountability, public and private schools are being asked to consider merit pay for their teachers, something that was unthinkable not many years ago.

Parenthetically, Boards are starting to consider merit pay for their heads. I know heads who are getting bonuses if the admissions numbers or fundraising goals are met. And yet, are they really the only one responsible for those numbers being met? And what happens when they are not, and yet the Head is effective in many other ways? And perhaps even beloved?

In addition, many more administrators have been added to staffs, with not only burgeoning Development Offices, HR and Plant managers in the Business Office, but the advent of Marketing, Communications and Technology directors. Not only is it difficult to manage so many people, but historically teachers are resistant and resentful of the presence of so many administrators and staff who are not doing what they consider to be the main work of the school, the teaching. And, in the face of this, they are also asked to be part of the “branding” or marketing of the school. Imagine their reactions to that 😊

I believe there is a “culture clash” that has been created here, and often see Dev and Business offices viewed as “cultural outsiders”.

It takes enormous thought, focus, heart and courage for a Head to lead these many multiple constituencies, and to unify them as one whole, one valued culture with a shared vision.

To say nothing of the appearance of inequality when many Administrators command market rate salary packages.

And, of course, all of these business functions are to support the work of the teacher, and hopefully teachers are benefiting in concrete ways as well, through higher salaries and benefits. In some schools, certain teachers and administrators are even getting “signing bonuses” and sabbaticals.

Sounds like a business to me.

4) Boards are drawing more corporate folks

But of course. Given the above, schools *need* trustees who are knowledgeable in the areas of finance, governance, management, evaluation and accountability, etc.

The problem is that since schools are unique cottage industries, and by definition are “conservative and traditional”, they resist not only change but viewing themselves as being able to measure their success. They are in the business of growing people, the whole child, with all the complexities of human development and societal needs.

The critical needs for Boards to know that their schools are “academically successful” and to hold their Head accountable is certainly important. How they do that is up for grabs.

The challenge for Boards is how to measure the success of a school head, hopefully appreciating what each has inherited, and the importance of the partnership between Head and Board. I have worked with many, many current heads who say they are feeling the squeeze of these pressures, and who believe they are being asked to be “God on a good day”or maybe just have an MBA.

5) *The tyranny of rising expectations*

John Kennedy coined the phrase “the tyranny of rising expectations”, which is quite apt for what we see in schools today.

Tuitions are higher than ever, with many schools costing more than some colleges. Capital campaigns are becoming a given, and ongoing. Fundraising is off the charts, and heads are expected to be the main cheerleader for the cause.

Teacher salaries are finally adjusting more to their value. In California, many schools are also trying to attract younger teachers by finding ways to supplement their housing.

Heads are earning far more than they ever expected when they entered the field. The concept of a compensation package was a non-reality.

With these rising numbers, I am certain there are rising expectations. One might also think of this as a “Faustian Pact”. In any case, it causes those who are invested in the school to pay more attention, and to expect more. Parents, students, and, of course, trustees.

- a) The changing role of the head can be especially difficult for *teachers*. Many came to the school to be mentored or guided by a certain Head, and are surprised that they have so many responsibilities away from the workings of the school. And, they also complain of being overworked, overwatched, and pressured by demanding and anxious parents, and want the Head, or a key administrator, to run interference.

This is complicated by the increasing needs of training the younger generation of school leaders and teachers. There is a gap in numbers between the Vietnam era of teachers, and the current crop. Teachers today are also not staying in one place as long, which is a hallmark of their generation. The loyalty factor to one

institution has changed dramatically, and many are looking for the next great opportunity. Which they may feel is not where they are.

What I often see is that if a Head is faring well with the Board, willing and able to be more of a CEO and spend more time with the Board and its operations, the staff feel neglected and sometimes even betrayed. If the Head continues to be the educational leader, closely connected to teacher, student, family and program, their relationship with the Board can suffer.

b) *families and parents* who are more anxious and insecure

Much is being written about this, and we know it is coming out of an uncertain, threatened and constantly changing world, complicated by a generation of parents who are largely children of 60's parents. Parents who grew up in relative peace and prosperity, and who believed that they could do and be anything, where gender and race were not boundaries, and where they were highly protected and cherished.

Of course many of us would say these are fine values, yet psychologists and educators are reporting that this generation has tremendous expectations not only on themselves, but for their children. Failing is not an option, and "*the blessing of the skinned knee*" (Mogel) hard to comprehend.

What we may have created, however, are families where authority is overly questioned, parents who do not trust themselves, their instincts, each other, and therefore the schools where they send their children to have all their needs met.

Teachers and administrators are asked to be not only be fantastic ("good to great!") teachers and mentors, but therapists and wise elders as well.

Schools are bringing in more learning needs experts and counselors, and parents are even supplementing the independent school's program with tutors, more extracurricular activities, college advisors, etc.

Add into the mix rising tuitions, and now threatened parental salaries, as well as capital and endowment campaigns in midstream....and one can only imagine how this will deepen the needs and anxieties of today's parents. The Head is certainly going to be seen as the leader in this economic crisis, and it is a defining time in their leadership.

Crisis can define us, even strengthen us (Rahm Emanuel), and at no other time has it been so obvious how important the relationship between the Board and Head need to be...the ways to work through this moment draw on many experiences and skills that trustees can provide.

TO SUMMARIZE:

1) *Clarity and integrity begins with the Board*

Be clear about the messages you deliver. Who you are, and who you aren't. Avoid mixed messages. Start with the *Mission*. Is it right? Is it too much? Too little? Is it clear? Is it shared? What is true? Do you practice what you preach? How do you know?

You are the leaders of the Mission. Everyone takes their cue from you. *Ground Rules for Effective Communication*? Honor them?

Be clear about the purpose and authority of the Board. (Mission, Policy, Planning and Strategy, Fundraising, Hiring and supporting the head) . Schools need trustees who understand the nature of the Head-Board partnership, honor boundaries, and support the Head/school in those key areas.

Be clear about the role you expect of the Head these days. Internal or external? More educational leader or CEO? What are the needs of the school at this time? What are the trade-offs in shifting the presumed role to CEO, and how do you navigate those shifts in the greater community and culture? Has the Head been included in clarifying and buying into these shifts? Do you have a plan that is clear to the Board and the Head?

Heads also need to manage and lead with this clarity and accountability across the system. We understand the importance of this with students, but schools are notoriously “*the land of the polite*”. Some even view themselves as “families”. I definitely think it is time to reframe that metaphor and stick with being communities. Where there is clarity and connection, mutual responsibility and organizational accountability.

This means that Heads need to not only evaluate, but even *let go* of those employees who are not at the necessary standard of excellence. This includes administrators and teachers who have been allowed to stay on, sometimes in varied roles, and who no longer truly meet the needs of the school. This is one of the most difficult things to do in communities where the leader believes in the potential of all, even the adults. And this is a major area of tension between trustees and heads, where school folks view Boards as too “corporate”. However, it is part of being truly clear and accountable.

Ironically, with this clarity and mutual accountability, teachers and families will relax more, understanding more the big picture of the culture, and their role in it.

When the leadership “practice what they preach”, and are clear about who they are and are not, with aligned processes that support that clarity...people are able to rally around that shared mission and vision.

2) *Schools are businesses...some BIG businesses*

Schools need to be seen as mission-driven and professionally run. Sustainable across time. They are businesses providing human services.

It is necessary to recognize the tension and struggle in assessing your product and processes. Heads and his/her team need to interpret for and with Boards what distinguishes your school from a money -making operation. And Heads need to allow and appreciate the expertise trustees bring, to support and inform you about how to make wise and sustainable business decisions. The partnership at its best.

The Board Chair and Head MUST have a *genuine partnership*. You are the gatekeepers and models for the rest of the school. Takes time and honesty; heart and courage. Talk about your work styles and needs. Manage time carefully, that meets both of your schedules. Can the Head truly share his/her feelings with the Chair? Vice versa? (chief critic and cheerleader) Do you trust one another? You must have each other’s backs. Until you don’t, and then be clear about that.

Heads need and deserve clear, appropriate, thoughtful and timely evaluations.

Contracts that are timely, realistic and appropriate.

Heads need to recognize that as CEO’s, there are increased expectations and financial rewards, and to be able to be part of their goal-setting and professional growth.

More schools are supporting Heads with coaching and professional development, understanding that leadership is complicated, demanding, and ever-changing.

Heads also need to be honest with themselves about their “*match*” with the school. Is it right? Has it changed? Are the expectations clear? Is it time to leave? Do you allow yourselves time for “inquiry, reflection and growth”(Senge)? Are you practicing the *Serenity Prayer* (God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.)

And, I would be remiss not to note that there are many heads who are enjoying these new roles, especially when they have the resources and support of the Board to do so. They often have the interest and/or skill sets to be more external, and even observe that it gives them different kinds of choices as to where to spend their time. They are often leaders who have either inherited or built, Boards and Administrative teams who are in genuine partnership with them.

Even here, tho, I am certain the transition to that model was not easy, or painless. The ways this is all done is also informed by the age and stage of the school, the Head, its size and resources.

3) *...and communities*

- a) Communities need to know their *shared mission and vision*. The Big Picture and their role in it. All need to have a locus of control, as well as a point person to whom they report and connect. Heads have no choice with the changes upon them but to learn to genuinely delegate more.

Leaders are, by nature, control freaks. It is one reason for their success. And they are often very capable in many areas. However, with the many new demands upon schools, and the need for Heads to be more external and “lead the Board”, you have no choice but to create and grow highly functioning Administrative teams.

More and more larger schools are taking on the model of an administrator who runs the internal workings of the school, i.e. faculty, evaluation, program, etc...facility to the CFO....and so on....

High functioning teams (this includes Boards) involve clarity of “*authority, roles and boundaries*”, shared ground rules for all to appropriately speak up and be heard, time for meeting and reflection, *mutual trust and accountability*, and genuine delegation.

Delegation is no longer a luxury, and takes real trust and communication. Many teams I work with are actually more “groups”, and work in silos and mostly through their Heads. There is a necessary paradigm shift that needs to occur, where each owns their turf, recognizing that you are all part of a larger whole, a system, and “your success is my success”. The use of *Ground Rules* will assist in bringing that to reality.

Delegation also includes including trustees where appropriate, and honoring the value they bring your school. Again, this is where the relationship between the Head and Board Chair is so critical to the success and well being of the whole community.

4) *Some thoughts on Board meetings and processes*

They need to be clear, consistent, interesting, meaningful. Time is precious and you want to spend it well. You are volunteers and are there to make a difference. You deserve feeling valued, and need to be acknowledged, along with the head. Mutual appreciation. Honest dialogue. Tolerance for failure and growth.

Trustees also need to be clear about why they are choosing to be on this Board at this time. Be honest with self about agendas and motivations. Clear about ways you can make a difference.

Try to seek experienced board members, and consider 3 year renewable terms. Best is when the Chair serves for at least 2 years, and there is a match between the head and chair. I recommend no faculty on Boards. Their voice should be important in many other key ways.

Good idea to have another school head on the Board for perspective. Consider more community folks or alums. Try to stay at 30,000 feet. (next generation)

The role of the Comm on Trustees is a vital one.

Have at least 2 Board retreats a year. Reflective and connective. More dialogue, use email. More detail work done in committee, dialogue and decision-making with whole Board.

Few Executive sessions. Strengthens trust. Make certain that your “executive committee is not a “shadow board”, unless you have very large fund-raising boards.

Boards need to have rigorous *annual Board self-evaluations*, which are in concert with the goals and evaluation of the Head. The partnership as again as metaphor and reality.

Implement shared “*Ground Rules for Effective Communication*”...those are the glue for all of the above. (*refer to Freed’s *Ten Ground Rules for Communication*)

- 5) There is a “*changing of the guard*” afoot. It is now more important than ever for the *Head/Board partnership* to exist. Individuals and cultures are the most vulnerable when there are exits and entrances, beginnings and endings. It causes the homeostasis to destabilize for a period of time. By necessity.

In schools, when the Headship turns over, through retirement or otherwise, it is critical for the leadership to be clear, connected and thoughtful, as you either weather a crisis, or plan carefully for the transition. It is essential to honor the

exiting head, symbolically and in reality....and to support the entering head in a myriad of ways, personally and institutionally. Culture change takes 3-5 years.

I recommend *leadership transition teams during* these moments, and all that I have said today is applicable. Recognizing the core values of the school, and, determining the kind of head the school now needs, i.e internal, external or a combination.

And providing a process where all the shareholders can inform those decisions.

I have developed a process I call "*historical-cultural mapping*" where folks have the opportunity to graphically brainstorm and observe the key events from the founding to the current day...and project into the future. It can be quite helpful in the beginning of any major transition, not just strategic planning or orientations, in making sense of a crisis, or succession planning.

6) And finally... breathe. ***Value and celebrate one another!***

Schools are notorious for "what have you done for me lately?" This is hard and important work, and each of you is making a unique contribution to your schools.

Thank you for all that you do for children.

* ***FREED'S GROUND RULES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION***

- 1) SHOW UP (on time, stay the whole time)
- 2) PAY ATTENTION (to heart and meaning)
- 3) BE HONEST (Is it right? Is it fair? Is it necessary?)
- 4) NOT BE ATTACHED TO THE OUTCOME (suspend judgment in the moment; be open to another's perspective)
- 5) COME FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE ("I" messages)

- 6) CHECK OUT YOUR ASSUMPTIONS (“What am I thinking and feeling? What are YOU thinking and feeling?”)
- 7) ASSUME GOOD WILL AND VALUE (everyone wants to be valued, heard and respected)
- 8) RIGHT TO PASS/ STAY THE COURSE (timing is everything)
- 9) DEFINE AND HONOR CONFIDENTIALITY (no assumptions!)
- 10) DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU WILL DO! (integrity in practice)

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- Ground Rules do not exist in a vacuum. It is essential to have clarity and articulation of the shared Vision and Mission, with policies and practices that support and hold all accountable to fulfilling that Mission.

Ground Rules are held in that context.