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SUCCESSION PLANNING: GETTING IT RIGHT

Succession Planning: Getting it Right

Fall 2017

“Fail to plan? Plan to fail.”

That familiar adage is a powerful reminder that, like any other important project, a successful search for a head of school begins with a well-thought-out plan. Ideally developed well in advance of either a sudden or anticipated change in the head's



office, a leadership succession plan serves as both a framework for thinking about the school's future leadership and a guide for the board as it attends to what is arguably its most important task: securing the school's next leader and ensuring continuity of leadership.

Systematic planning for the inevitable leadership change has never been more important for independent schools. According to the 2009 NAIS study of school leadership and governance, 68 percent of sitting heads indicated that they planned on retiring or changing jobs by 2019. The competition among schools for

qualified heads who can provide the next generation of leadership is strong and growing. At the same time, the rapidly changing educational environment makes it even more important for a board to “get it right” in selecting the head to lead the school through new, and often uncertain, times.

The tension that arises from the school’s need for a leader who can both provide stability and manage change advantageously creates unique opportunities and challenges for boards. Developing a succession plan *before* a leadership change will help boards make better decisions in the search process and avoid the pitfalls that often come with such a change.

Despite the advantages of planning for leadership succession in a thoughtful and strategic way prior to a search, it is too often the case that the topic doesn’t even come up in board discussions until the need arises and the urgency is inescapable. But schools and boards will have greater success if they thoroughly and deeply engage in a succession planning process.

The Succession Principles

“Building Leadership Capacity: Reframing the Succession Challenge,” an article by the nonprofit Bridgespan Group, explores the idea that succession planning is “not a periodic event triggered by an executive’s departure. Instead, it is a proactive and systematic investment in building a pipeline of leaders within an organization, so that when transitions are necessary, leaders at all levels are ready to act.”

Succession planning means both developing a planning mindset and creating a written plan to ensure the orderly transition of school leadership from its current head to its new leader. The planning mindset is as essential as the plan itself because conditions change quickly in schools today, and if not regularly reviewed and updated, plans can quickly become stale and irrelevant.

Succession planning rests on three critical principles:

- Changes in school leadership are inevitable.
- No position is more important to the success of a school than its head, so the right match is critical.
- Identifying, selecting, hiring, and sustaining the school’s next head are perhaps the most important tasks a board may have.

With that in mind, a school’s leadership succession planning process must address two different circumstances:

Planned leadership change, when, for example, a sitting head informs the board of his/her desire to leave the position by a certain date.

Unplanned change, when, for instance, a school head unexpectedly resigns; suddenly has his/her contract terminated; or has an accident, injury, or serious illness that might result in an interruption in leadership.

Successfully managing either type of change requires planning that incorporates both “hard” elements, such as budgeting for the expenses associated with a search, and “soft” aspects, such as identifying the ideal qualities the next head will possess.

Planned Change

Everyone is familiar with the advice that “the best time to search for a job is when you don’t need one.” Similarly, the best time for a board to begin succession planning is when it doesn’t need to. Boards can benefit by taking advantage of the relative calm of the current head’s tenure to plan for the school’s next leadership, even if that change appears to be years in the future or is unthinkable. When such planning happens prior to any type of leadership change, it provides a strong foundation for a search when the time comes and enables the search committee to be much more agile in its work.

At the formal level, succession planning includes:

- Budgeting for the financial resources needed to support the level of search the board anticipates (internal, local, regional, or national; with or without a search consultant).
- Building board consensus on the future direction of the school and what its ideal state will be in five, 10, and 20 years.
- Developing board agreement on the professional and personal qualities the ideal next head of school will possess.
- Defining the skills, expertise, attitudes, and understandings the ideal search committee will possess, and ensuring the board has or will have those people to call upon.
- Strategic communications planning.

Leadership succession planning also requires thorough board-level conversations about:

- The fact that no candidate will possess all desired qualities and how the “strategic deficits” of the best candidate will be mitigated.

- How the strategic deficits the school currently faces will be addressed so that the next head can step onto a platform of strength and not into a minefield of weakness.
- The need to support the current head as he or she transitions out.
- The need for the sitting head to support the change.
- The importance of having the board chair who hires the new head remain in that position for at least the first year of the new head's tenure.
- The possible viability of potential internal candidates.
- Identifying and addressing the needs of the school's many constituencies—students, parents, trustees, alumni, community stakeholders—during a time of change.

One note of caution: Because leadership succession planning is essentially a strategic plan for the continuity of leadership, it's possible that members of the school community might start to worry that it's a disguised strategy to oust the current leader. Any hint of this type of talk should be dispelled, *early* and *often*. Engaging the current head as a proactive partner in succession planning is one reassuring way to do this.

Unplanned Change

There are times when the head of school's tenure is interrupted unexpectedly. Pressing family situations may demand the head's immediate and complete attention; health issues may require short- or long-term leaves; matters may arise that require the sitting head's resignation or, possibly, termination. Any circumstance that significantly interrupts the head's ability to lead has the potential to disrupt normal school operations, unsettle faculty and staff, distance parents, and fracture boards.

Although a board cannot foresee every possible crisis, it can reduce the potential negative impact leadership crises may have by creating a plan that addresses the most probable: short-term leave; long-term leave; and sudden departure due to resignation, termination, or untimely death. Asking and answering the following questions—in detail and in writing—will give a board the tools it needs to keep the school on course and the community feeling engaged and informed.

Who is in charge of the school during a short-term absence of the head of school? Long-term absence?

In case of the sudden departure of the head, who will be running the school on a day-to-day basis? How will that person be supported? Compensated?

What is the process for communicating headship changes in a way that will sustain the confidence and trust of the different school constituencies?

What role will the board, and specifically the executive committee, need to play in order to support the head and the school through the crisis?

The Case for Internal Talent Development

Although “succession planning is the No. 1 organizational concern of U.S. nonprofits,” according to the Bridgespan Group, “they are failing to develop their most promising pool of talent: homegrown leaders.” In fact, as stated in “After Success: Replacing a Long-Serving Head of School,” a Heidrick & Struggles report by George Conway and Stephen Miles, more than 90 percent of independent schools undertake external head of school searches. A board’s immediate reaction to filling a headship position might be “national search,” but it should weigh the advantages of promoting from within. For one thing, external searches can be expensive. For another, there’s always the possibility of losing critical institutional momentum as a head unfamiliar with the school learns the ropes.

Research from the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) supports the notion of developing internal candidates for the headship. Doug Lyons, CAIS executive director, reports that over a 10-year period, 35 percent of CAIS member schools that recruited and hired externally did not offer those heads a second contract. During the same decade, all 18 of its schools that hired internal candidates signed those heads on for another term. This pattern is not exclusive to independent schools. As Ram Charan’s still-timely 2005 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Ending the CEO Succession Crisis,” reports, in North America, 55 percent of departing outside CEOs were fired, compared with 34 percent of insiders; in Europe, the split was 70 percent/55 percent.

Sometimes, boards look externally because the school needs a change, and bringing in someone from outside the trenches is the best way to accomplish that. But often it’s because, on the surface, there are no suitable internal candidates. Developing such an internal pipeline, however, is something the board should discuss—and then broach thoughtfully with the current head. Boards, in a non-threatening manner, can work to help heads understand that succession planning is a hallmark of good governance, and not a veiled attempt to replace them. Schools might also consider making “potential for school leadership” part of the hiring criteria and evaluation process for assistant or associate heads of school, academic directors, and other senior administrators. Mentorship opportunities and the possibility of being groomed for school leadership can make an administrative position more attractive for millennials who are looking

for tangible paths to advance in their careers.

Honoring Legacy

Planning to replace a founding or long-standing head of school often requires higher levels of care and sensitivity to the softer, cultural issues in a school. In these instances, recognizing and celebrating the departing head takes on a special significance. A departing head's transition plan, constructed with the executive committee, can and should include scheduled events to toast (and roast, with affection) him or her with the school's different constituencies. Any perceived slights to the iconic figure can sour the community during the leadership transition, undermine the board, and possibly make it difficult for the new head to succeed.

It's also important to address the fact that founding and long-serving heads often hold volumes of school policies and practices in their brains, not on paper—which is why succession planning efforts must include capturing this wealth of institutional knowledge in a way that makes it easy to present to the next head of school. This can be done by regularly updating all policy manuals and board, employee, and student handbooks, as well as creating manuals where none may currently exist.

Maintaining institutional memory is perhaps an even greater imperative in the international school community, where the tenure for heads of school is now under four years, according to "Change Leadership," a Spring 2015 *Independent School* magazine article by Pearl Kane and Justin Barbaro. Consequently, part of an international school's succession planning should be a thorough and comprehensive onboarding process for the incoming head that ideally begins the year before the formal transfer of leadership.

Potholes and Possibilities

Sally Powell, head of The Baldwin School (PA), and her board chair, Terry Steelman, write in the March/April 2015 *Trustee's Letter*, "Transitions in our schools can be disruptive, drama-inducing, and difficult to direct. They can also be energizing, enriching, and easy to embrace. When change is in the air, a school must be very purposeful, focused on reinforcing the relationships that bind its broad constituencies." Boards must also look out for possible challenges along the way. Head search consultant Bob Fricker notes that succession planning efforts can be undermined by heads who are insecure in their positions, weak or confused boards with high trustee turnover, a change-resistant culture, faculty and staff who are overly comfortable with the status quo, and an unexamined and uncorrected pattern of high turnover in the head's office.

The reality for almost all school heads and their boards is that the *urgent* always overwhelms the *important*. The day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month focus that heads and boards invariably take to ensure the short-term survival of the school often precludes planning to maintain strength as leadership transitions. But it is vital to devote time and attention to the long-term health and success of a school—which includes ongoing succession planning. Schools should create time for it by including it on board meeting agendas, and perhaps as a generative topic for the board’s next retreat.

“The future cannot be predicted, but it can be invented,” Dennis Gabor, Nobel Prize winner in physics wrote in his 1963 book, *Inventing the Future*. Similarly, we cannot predict the future for our schools, but we can shape it through leadership succession planning. Change is inevitable, and it can be disruptive. How successfully our schools adapt to demographic shifts, manage economic swings, and adjust to cultural tides depends largely upon the strength and continuity of leadership. Count on it. Better still, plan for it.

A version of this article will appear in the new edition of the NAIS Head Search Handbook, due out later this fall.

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