



# Looking for the Five Head of School: Advice to Search Committees

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How does a Search Committee select a great Head of School?

Too often, Search Committees select candidates who match a specific list of criterion unique to the short-term challenges the school is facing. Sometime Search Committees want someone just like the retiring Head, some want anyone as long as he is not like the current Head. Both approaches are a mistake.

There are five-categories that are common to successful Heads of School. Search Committees do well to consider the strengths of the candidates in these areas as they go about the business of choosing their next Head.

## **I. Governance Leadership**

Of all the challenges facing school leaders (enrollment, teacher shortage, student behavior, litigious society, etc.) leading the Board of Trustees is the biggest challenge. Often Boards are populated by people who have no non-profit Board experience let alone school board experience. The Head must see the Board as his/her class, one that needs to be instructed, inspired and encouraged to become independent learners. The Head leads the Board by providing the information and analysis the Board needs to make its decision. The Head must be the purveyor to the Board of the brutal facts about the school, while providing clear analysis and reasoned counsel, all wrapped in unbridled optimism.

The relationship between the Head and the Board must be cautiously developed with careful lines of authority outlined and assiduously maintained. Currently there is an over emphasis on the Chair/Head relationship. It is far healthier for the Head to have a cooperative relationship with a committee which should work with the Head to establish goals and to evaluate the executive's performance. The healthiest schools do not place an over emphasis on the power of the Chair or the special relationship between the Chair and the Head, but rather insist that the Chair be an even-handed arbiter and facilitator of the Board's business who is only the first among equals in establishing the priorities for the Head of School. It is not uncommon for a Head to have a new Chair every two years and for there to be no one on the Board who hired him/her in 5 years (which corresponds with increased school head

turnover). It is not just the Head who needs to develop skills in this area, continuing Board professional development (annual retreats on governance) in this area is essential.

## **II. Fundraising Acumen**

The operative word is 'acumen', a personality predisposition. School Heads are fundraisers, but they don't need to have been a professional fundraiser in the past to be a good fundraiser as the Head of School. Fundraising is not a difficult skill to learn if the Head is willing to work at it. Heads should be prepared to spend 50-60% (75% during campaigns) of their time on fund and friend-raising. External affairs require a Head's constant attention and school boards should make this expectation clear to candidates.

Fundraising, whether for Annual Giving or a major campaign have the same components: Donor research, clear and well-reasoned argument, high customer satisfaction and relentless pursuit. The Head is the chief storyteller of the school and must be able to make convincing presentation to potential donors. Every opportunity, the sideline of a game, a cocktail party or a parent conference, is a fundraising opportunity. But Boards make a mistake if they think the Head must be a "hail fellow well met" in order to be successful at raising money. The best fundraiser I know is shy, soft-spoken, a cerebral academic who is deaf in one ear. But when he speaks about his school, it is riveting and compelling.

## **III. Financial Management**

A Head of School must impress the finance committee that s/he understands the financial condition of the school and is the key decision-maker on the expenditure of school resources. There are certain key questions that a Finance Committee routinely ask to which the Head must know the answer. Unfortunately for the Head, these questions change with the topic of the meeting. Boards occasionally will err by selecting a strong finance person over a person who will be a great school leader simply to have some piece of mind on financial issues. Boards would serve their school better by providing a mentor to help a new Head gain the control s/he needs over financial issues. This is particularly important when it comes to budget development. A Board's over reliance on a skilled CFO or Business Manager can shorten the vision of the school and undermine the Head's ability to lead.

## **IV. Intellectual tone setting**

The Head of School sets the intellectual tone of the School. This is different from academic expertise or leadership. Through public assemblies from back to school night to graduation speeches, Heads must accept that they have an opportunity to shape the tone of conversation at school. This is where educational leadership splits from management. The Head who misses the opportunity to elevate the conversations about ideas is the Head who doesn't challenge the school beyond its current state. Search committee's would do well to ask for a copy of a speech the candidate has given as to ask

themselves, is this the tone we want at our school. And Boards make a mistake if they don't confront the Head who gives a speech that is ill-prepared or is on about the mundane. More should be expected.

## **V. Culture shaping**

The most confounding and least understood aspect of school leadership by Boards is that in education, everything is of value. Quakers will tell us even seating quietly has instructional value. Therefore in a world where "all the pigs are equal", it is the Head's responsibility to select which worthy cause or person will come first. The Head, within the Board's policies, sets the agenda for the school. This is a tremendous opportunity to shape the culture of a school, not only in what is selected, but how the selection is made. It is important that schools select Heads who have a mature educational philosophy, not one grounded in current educational clichés, but one which spring from core educational values. How to find the core values of the Head candidates requires careful preparation of search committee's consultants. Those consultants who have not been successful Heads themselves should draw upon expertise of those who have distinguished school leadership records to help selection committees be able to properly evaluate candidates in this crucial, and often misunderstood, area.