



Mark Desjardin's *Leading Ideas* on

## So You Want to Be a Head of School? *6 Lessons from the Trenches*

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Endicott Peabody, founder and headmaster of Groton School for nearly six decades, once claimed that in order to be a successful school head “one had to be a bit of a bully.” To be sure, the exploits and actions of other such legendary heads as Frank Boyden of Deerfield, Frank Ashburn of Brooks School, Henry Coit of St. Paul’s School and Horace Dutton Taft of Taft School, defined in the minds of America’s social and educational elite the ideal of how a headmaster behaved. Even today heads at a variety of schools sense that the ghosts of these men still linger on the playing fields and in the classrooms of their schools.

Yet, it is interesting to think how such leaders, so often celebrated and idolized in the minds of many, would fare in today’s school world. My sense is that few would survive beyond their first year. Imagine as a head what would happen if you pounded your fists on the table in a board meeting and exclaimed, “I don’t need to show you a detailed budget, my school needs money. Go raise it.” This approach worked well for Frank Boyden, but it is difficult to imagine any of my peers using such tactics with any effectiveness. On another level, when either Coit or Peabody made decisions regarding the expulsion of a student a team of high power lawyers were not threatening to file a lawsuit the very next day. And, of course, at times we can only dream of how old time school heads dealt with obnoxious and over anxious parents. Most openly dismissed parents as impediments to the development of a healthy adolescent. None of these heads had the constant pressure that college admissions generate today. In contrast, many heads either met with students to tell them where they were going or wrote a letter to the college that contained the list of students who should be admitted. Finally, these heads would be hard pressed to understand the need for female teachers, married teachers, day care centers, diverse student bodies and PPRSM accounts.

While it makes for interesting reading and discussion, it remains difficult to glean from the biographies of these school heads any practical leadership lessons that are applicable to complex realities of leading a school in today’s more fluid times. Few topics have been studied in greater detail and have been written about more thoroughly than the subject of leadership. Whether it is ranking competencies and skills, conducting in-depth personality tests, or attending the latest and most improved version of head of school boot camp, no real consensus has been reached as to what leadership paradigm is the best to emulate. For most of us who take on the challenges of leading a school, experience has been our best and most reliable teacher. Reflecting upon the myriad of challenges that I confronted during my first three years as a school head, I thought it might prove useful to summarize some thoughts for those individuals either entering their first school head post or anyone who might



feel compelled to pursue such a position. For purpose of clarify and focus, I have narrowed my remarks to six lessons.

### **Lesson One: Develop and Be Able to Articulate a Personal Philosophy of Education**

In my conversations with current heads and those who aspire to become heads, I have been surprised to discover that only a few individuals have a clear, concise and focused sense of educational mission and purpose. My sense is that this lack of clarity on the part of school heads leads to many unproductive relationships with boards. Most board/head conflicts are rooted in disagreements over values. Unfortunately, the first time trouble spots emerge are in times of crisis: the firing of a popular faculty member, the dismissal of a student, or the removal of a coach. There has been little time for trust and relationship building between a head and board members and therefore individuals tend to gravitate to their own set of personal values, often at the expense of what is best for the institution. While such crisis's can never fully be averted, it behooves heads to be proactive about what they value. Avoid trendy educational cliches about emotional intelligence, academic excellence and the value of a liberal arts education. I once overheard a headmaster tell a prospective group of parents at an admission gathering that he was a "traditionalist." When an insightful parent pressed the headmaster to define that term more clearly, the head replied, "Why, I believe in the importance of traditions."

Be reflective and decide what three or four guiding principles will serve as your inner compass. These three or four core values, in essence, should serve as your personal mission statement. These ideals should match closely with the values and priorities of a specific school. A school, for instance, that places a tremendous emphasis on high academic achievement as defined by national merit finalists, AP results and Ivy League college placements, may not be the most appropriate school if you define and measure student success in less tangible ways. These ideals are meaningless unless you can also model them on a daily basis.

### **Lesson Two: You Cannot be All Things to All People**

From examining the list of "ideal characteristics of the next school head" that search consultants put together in leadership profiles, a case can be made that many search committees are looking for a combination of Jesus Christ, Mother Theresa, Margaret Thatcher and Ghandi. These laundry lists of characteristics can be annoying and often seem unrealistic. One might surmise that these lists in fact represent a wish list of those traits many in the school community felt the former head should have exhibited. I have known many a school community to lament over a lack of strong leadership once more contemplative and consensus driven leaders replaced their very decisive heads. Yet, these were the same faculty, parents and boards who complained loudly and often with every major decision the former head made. The simple point is that you can't please everyone.

As an aside, if you are in a head of school candidate interview, ask the search committee to articulate what they believe are the two most pressing issues the school faces. In addition, get them to narrow their focus on what three or four traits in the head they are seeking. If little consensus is reached, or their answers represent a different philosophical orientation than yours, it is probably best to politely remove yourself from the search.



Be comfortable with who you are, however that translates into your own leadership style. I have an open door policy for parents, students and faculty and many people routinely drop by for a visit. Others may feel disrupted and uncomfortable with such a wide-open policy. Decide what works for you and make the necessary adjustments along the way. Keep in mind, no matter how hard you try, you will not be able to satisfy everyone.

### **Lesson Three: You Can Choose Where to Set the Tone**

Someone wise once said, “a waterfall does not start in the middle.” I discovered that one place that says a great deal about a school community is what happens on the playing fields. How do players interact with teammates and opponents? How do coaches treat their players and the officials? How do visiting players and parents interact with members of the visiting school community? Do coaches run up the score? It is my belief that behavior of coaches, players and parents are a direct reflection upon the tone and leadership of a school head. I place a high value on sportsmanship. Therefore, I meet with all coaches at the beginning of the year and clearly articulate my expectations of them. I sit on the benches at games and visit locker rooms at halftime to listen and observe the wonderful teachable moments such interactions inspire. I meet weekly with our athletic director and discuss issues and situations that might be inconsistent with our philosophical approach to athletics. The point is that you have the capacity to decide what issues are important and need to be addressed. Again, modeling behavior in this area becomes critical. A head of an athletically competitive boarding school was known for advocating sportsmanship at weekly school assemblies, yet at the same time he could be heard especially at hockey games berating the referees over certain calls. Pick what issues are central to you and make the time to get involved so the “tone” can be reflective of your style and beliefs. Remember, practice what you preach!

### **Lesson Four: You Work for the Chair of the Board**

The most important relationship you will have at your institution is with your board chair. From the outset, it should be made clear that you report directly to that individual. This prevents the usual confusion that some heads feel in having to be responsible for making every board member happy. I strongly advocate setting aside time for at least one face to face meeting a week with the board chair, if this is not possible, setting a specific time for a weekly phone call is advisable. The critical issue here is developing a relationship based upon trust and that takes time, both yours and the board chair’s. The onset of a crisis is not the time to build the relationship. In my conversations with the board chair, I follow the rule of telling good news at 90% and bad news at 110%. I have also found it useful in difficult situations to ask my board chair “what would he do” if faced with a particular decision. Seeking input and consulting prior to making difficult decisions provides a sense of shared responsibility with the final outcome.

### **Lesson Five: Nothing can Prepare You for this Job**

Associate Heads, division heads and directors of college counseling and admission beware! Nothing can prepare you for how overwhelmed and unprepared you will feel during your first years of being a head. As a head, you are charged with running the whole organization. The buck stops on your desk! Unlike leading a division or being second in command, every decision, mistake, problem, and misfortune draws your attention. As Upper School



head I never had to worry about the kitchen or maintenance staff and when a water pipe broke I still slept well at night not knowing that it would cost \$50,000 to repair the damage. In addition to parents, board and faculty, your new constituency are the alumni. If you think you had to juggle in your former positions, when you assume a “headship” multiply the number of balls (bowling) by two and then do it at warp speed. Remember, as part of this act, nobody expects you to drop the ball, and everyone thinks that they can perform better than you.

### **Lesson Six: Be Connected to Your School**

Over time it is easy to become swayed to move away from the day to day operations of a school. Who wants to gnash teeth over the gritty details of a discipline decision or mediate a conflict over what subject gets more attention in the curriculum when you can be dining on fine food and discussing the finer lessons of headship at the variety of conferences and regional meetings. I know of some heads that spend between two or three weeks in total away from their schools to fulfill various regional and national roles. To be sure, becoming involved and giving back to the larger educational community is necessary and important. Yet, your two most important tasks are to serve your board and serve the members of your administrative team. Neither of these roles can be filled “in absentia.”

While the stresses and strains of leading an institution can at times seem overwhelming, the rewards and satisfaction of the job often outweigh the difficulties associated with the more turbulent times. Ours is a most noble and rewarding profession. I wish you well as you begin your new journey as a school head.