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Organizational Change in the Independent School Promise or Peril

Implementing organizational changes in the independent school poses some unique and special challenges. What is the nature of these challenges? How might leadership identify "resistances" and increase collaboration? How might leadership mobilize the entire school community to participate in organizational assessment? Specifically, how might leadership translate organizational vision into concrete, achievable goals? And, how might these goals be implemented? Each will be addressed in turn.

What is the Nature of these Challenges?

A requisite to understanding these organizational challenges is an appreciation as to why faculty are drawn to work in independent schools. Many factors prompt faculty to work in independent schools, including smaller class size, the freedom to develop their own curriculum, more contact with, often, very able students, collegiality, a "family-like" environment, insulation from the (ostensible) perils of public schools, academic freedom, freedom from the collegiate atmosphere of "publish or perish," an ability to influence youth at a time when it will have the most developmental impact, and an opportunity to be part of a caring, nurturing community. Independent schools allow for innovation and creativity. Moreover, often they are caring and nurturing communities. For this reason, faculty end up spending a lot of time at school and devoting their lives to the school community.

Often, the independent school becomes a "place like home." If a faculty person likes to teach English, direct plays, serve as the faculty editor of the school newspaper, teach cooking, coach basketball, and mentor new faculty, he or she can do it all at school. It's a veritable form of "one-stop shopping." Many view work at an independent school as a "calling" and headship as a kind of "secular ministry." To wit, note the number of heads who began their

careers in the ministry.

The independent school becomes like a second home. It becomes a comfortable place. A school can be a place to "hide out." If you are a shy person or a person who is not particularly comfortable going out into new settings and making friends and you work at an independent school, you need not overcome these personal challenges. You can build your life around the school. And, for the most part, you will be rewarded for your dedication and investment.

In fact, some faculty may look to the school to fulfill unmet needs. Many schools have a subgroup of faculty who look to the school to make them feel complete and/or to help them to carry out the tasks of everyday adult living such as: renting an apartment, preparing meals, creating a social life, establishing relationships, and taking care of oneself. Those who have spent time in boarding school settings have had the opportunity to witness this sort of phenomenon first-hand.

Often, faculty who are getting all of their needs met at the academy look very good prior to efforts at change. At a boarding school, these are the faculty who will cover extra weekends—they provide coverage in a pinch. They are available to help out in a time of need. Why? Because they have nothing going on in their lives outside of school.

In effect, they accomplish two goals simultaneously. First, they avoid some of the challenging tasks of adulthood such as making new friends and creating a life for oneself. Second, they achieve recognition for being devoted to the job. It may not be the healthiest strategy for the individual, but these individuals do make valuable contributions to the school.

Of course, this unending devotion to the school has potential downsides. Independent schools can be very insular places. Devoting oneself exclusively to them can limit one's vistas and may not always be good for the faculty and the students whose lives they influence. Because students often view faculty as role models, it can be very important for them to see that faculty have full lives and that they are always reaching and growing. A faculty person who is dependent on the school for a context, indeed for their own sense of personal identity, sends a frightening and unsettling message to the students, who, after all, must ultimately graduate and go out on their own.

Another downside to this sort of unending devotion to the school is that faculty who have given up their worldly possessions and aspirations in the name of serving the school expect reciprocity. When any of us invest in any relationship, we expect reciprocity. So, when someone comes along and starts tampering with our investment and changing it, we can become frightened and angry, especially if we have nothing outside of the relationship, in this case, the relationship to the school.

While change can mean a new and exciting beginning, it can mean a loss. The more one is dependently invested in the school, the more acutely the loss may be felt. One might be

quite frightened of change. Change can mean a loss of role, a loss of status, a loss of predictability, possibly a loss of livelihood, and even, in extreme cases, a loss of identity.

Take, for example, the music teacher who augments his salary by giving music lessons in the community and leading the choir at his church. His involvement helps to imbed the school in the community. It may even culminate in some interorganizational collaborations. He has a network, connections, and options. He isn't trapped. He has other prospects. For him, teaching is a choice. Contrast this to the music teacher who has no network outside of school. If he starts to feel that things are not going his way, he might feel very trapped. He may become frightened. People who feel that they have no options often become rigid and concrete. Moreover, they may displace their anger and frustration onto those around them, such as the head, their colleagues, and their students.

To summarize, a constellation of factors draw faculty to the independent school setting, including the desire for innovation, flexibility, creativity, community, caring, and perhaps a need for security. For some faculty, that need for security may be inordinate, almost like a need to be re-parented. Depending on their intensity and depth, some of these needs are adaptive and others maladaptive.

How might Leadership identify "Resistances" and Increase Collaboration?

Thus, heads often find themselves in quite a formidable position. They need to facilitate change while being respectful of and sensitive to the vulnerabilities of their constituents. How might leadership identify and overcome "resistances" to change and increase collaboration? For the reasons implied, this is not a straightforward task. Add to this complicated situation the fact that the head entrusted with bringing about change is very often a new head or an old head charged with a new mandate.

Enter into this maelstrom of chaos and confusion the new head or the old head confronted with a shifting Zeitgeist. In the case of the new head, why has the school brought in a new head? In my experience, it is rarely because the former head is retiring after a glorious 30-year career headship. Why are new heads hired? Typically, though not always, a new head has been sought after to "right all past wrongs," to institute changes that have heretofore defied implementation, and to remove or to at least "remote" all faculty who are viewed as impediments to this often elusive "change."

The new head's task is simple; it is "to right all wrongs." As anyone who has been a new head or who has witnessed the evolution of a new head can attest, with the inception of a new head, there is typically some magical thinking on the part of the board, the faculty, the parents, and the student body as to what this head can realistically accomplish.

That is, the new head is not only charged with "righting all wrongs," she is expected to do it

seamlessly, quickly—and, this is key, without making anyone uncomfortable. By definition, then, the head is placed in a precarious position. She knows little of the "lay of the land" and has had no time to build allegiances. She is in the untenable position of having to make changes that are so ugly and unpleasant that they were not attempted by her predecessor. And, typically, the new head is given precious little support.

Add to this the fact that when a new head enters, there is an atmosphere of great anxiety. Faculty wonder, "What will the new head be like? How will the head have an impact on me? Is my job secure? Is my role secure? What do I have to lose?"

Beyond these considerations, faculty experience a "transference" to the head. They project onto the head all of their fears and anxieties based on dealing with authority figures from the past. These fears are not based on the personality of the head. They are not personal. Rather, they are based on the faculty person's early experiences with primary parental figures. Enmeshed faculty are fraught with great trepidation. For those who are the most enmeshed and who view themselves as having few options, change can be literally terrifying. They may feel very threatened. In fact, some faculty, intrapsychically, may fear annihilation.

For a new head, it can be very helpful to recognize and to remember that many faculty reactions to him are driven not by his behavior (no matter what faculty may tell him), but rather by faculty anxiety about his motivations—anxiety that may spring from a historical well. It can be very helpful to remember this in attempting to understand some of the puzzling behavior that heads may encounter in their new role.

Of course, faculty seldom have insight into their own fear. Moreover, faculty who are terrified do not always experience their terror consciously. They seldom approach the new head saying, "I'm terrified of change, and I am sad that things will be different. For me, that will be a loss." More likely, they express their apprehensions in other less straightforward ways. If they were direct, they would evoke empathy. However, fear of change and a sense of loss are often cloaked in anger. It can take many forms. Some faculty may manage their fear by becoming hypervigilant about the motivations and behavior of the new head. They may be overtly critical of the new head, both in public and in private. Or, it can take more insidious forms, such as undermining the head by going behind the scenes to board members or stirring up the parent body or even exploiting the needs of adolescents to rebel.

There are antidotes to overenmeshment and overinvestment. It is important to recruit healthy faculty who are devoted to teaching and who have interests and commitments that extend beyond the school. Also, it is critically important to encourage new faculty to establish links beyond the academy. A school that has existing links with a college or university and with the broader community is in a great position to attract and retain healthier faculty, because healthy faculty do not want to live in isolation.

In light of these considerations, what steps might a new head and/or those who want to

support the head take? It may sound trite, but it is important to begin by taking steps to take care of herself. This will allow her to be more effective in her organizational assessment. She should obtain support outside of the independent school community. That is, despite the enormous pressure that a new head will feel to devote herself exclusively to the school, it is important to create and nurture external networks. Ideally, these networks might include other heads, both local and national, as well as an array of "non-school" colleagues and friends. An initial goal is to deepen one's understanding of the school. A second goal is to mobilize the school's constituents to help her with this task of organizational assessment.

How might Leadership Mobilize the Entire School Community to Participate in Organizational Assessment?

How might the head mobilize the entire school community to participate in an organizational assessment aimed at building creative, generative schools? How might this vision be translated into concrete, measurable behavioral goals? What steps might be taken to implement these shared behavioral goals? There are several critical ingredients in preparing for change. These include:

- establishing an atmosphere of safety and trust,
- generating an atmosphere of innovation by establishing a professional development program or strengthening an existing one,
- building links to the broader community, and
- seeking consultative support to gain perspective.

Establishing an Atmosphere of Safety and Trust

The requisites of establishing an atmosphere of safety and support are well known to most heads but warrant repetition. It is important to let the faculty get to know you in both the group and the individual context. Toward the latter end, it is important to create opportunities for easy one-on-one access. Those faculty who appear shy or reticent need to be courted.

Beyond this, it is important to create an atmosphere of "fair play." Faculty need to know, well in advance, how and when they will be evaluated and by what criteria. Whenever possible, they should be allowed to help to define their professional goals and the criteria by which they will be evaluated. Faculty also need regular, concrete, objective feedback. Specifically, they need to know what the head perceives to be their strengths and the areas that merit further development. That is, they need to know what changes they are expected to make and the timeframe in which they are expected to make them. They also need to know what sort of help they can expect and from whom. Ideally, any recommended changes should be tied to a mutually agreed upon professional development plan.

Creating an Atmosphere of Innovation: Designing a

Professional Development Program

In designing professional development programs, heads should ideally seek organizational consultation from someone knowledgeable about organizational dynamics and professional development. If the head familiarizes the consultant with the school's strengths and struggles, the program can be tailored to address the needs of the school and of each individual. The design and implementation of an ongoing, comprehensive, effective professional development program will greatly enhance the head's credibility with his faculty, particularly if this sort of program has depth and is closely tied to both school and faculty goals. Moreover, faculty development programs lead to an atmosphere of energy and innovation.

While there are many formats for effective programs, all share several critical ingredients. First, they include regular meetings, preferably off-site, where faculty can be free from interruption. The structure and location must create a contemplative atmosphere. Second, leadership conveys the idea that these meetings are a priority by providing "release time" for them. That is, participation is not something that faculty are expected to engage in "on their own time." Third, toward that end, they are devoted exclusively to professional development. Fourth, faculty meet with an expert outside facilitator. Fifth, meetings occur at regular, predictable intervals, such as quarterly for an entire day or monthly for three hours. Sixth, group members agree to ground rules designed to ensure a supportive, confidential atmosphere.

Another important aspect of these programs is that they allow heads to ask faculty to reflect on their professional goals. Specifically, in this context, faculty might be asked:

1. Where do you see yourself in five years? 10 years?
2. What special innovation would you like to bring to your classroom, to your school, to the community, over the next five years?
3. What resources, connections, mentors, and experiences do you need to achieve these goals?

As an adjuvant to professional development groups, heads may want to consider Balint groups. Balint groups, created by psychoanalyst Michael Balint, were originally designed to help family doctors deepen their understanding of patients whose behavior was annoying or troubling. Each week, physicians met to describe a case. Their focus was on examining their reactions to the patient. This process engendered understanding and empathy and often culminated in more compassionate treatment.

I have led these groups within independent schools with favorable results. Faculty readily grasped the notion that children are attempting to tell us something by their, at times, challenging and provocative behavior. Moreover, faculty recognized that the message could be deciphered and understood and responded to in a growth-enhancing fashion. In my experience, Balint groups have had many benefits for faculty, both intended and inadvertent.

Faculty became more psychologically sophisticated about children and about child development. With improved understanding, they became more effective in the classroom and more confident with children, parents, and colleagues.

Professional development groups and Balint groups are only a few of the professional development options that heads might consider. These opportunities might include implementing a faculty development program and establishing linkages with universities and other community organizations, such as those devoted to cultural activities, athletics, politics, religion, etc.

Generating an Atmosphere of Innovation: Building Links with the Broader Community

Schools can link with the broader community. Importantly, these links can culminate in the recruitment of superb faculty—both from a college or university and from other arenas within the community. Colleges or universities and schools can cross-pollinate in many ways to the benefit of both settings. School faculty can participate in college or university life by:

- serving as adjunct faculty,
- collaborating in research,
- attending graduate school,
- serving as teaching assistants in evening or weekend courses,
- teaching summer school or teaching within the pre-college program,
- tutoring within their subject areas,
- taking sabbaticals at a local college or university,
- attending college or university events such as concerts, political forums, athletic contests, etc.,
- using the college or university health club.

Undergraduates, graduate students, and college/university faculty can participate in school life by:

- filling student teacher positions,
- serving internships (in which they are able to pursue special interests, such as stage crew, play or musical production, counseling with professional supervision, editing school newspapers, coaching sports, fundraising, and public relations),
- tutoring,
- teaching summer school,

- conducting research.

Establishing Links with the Community

Beyond a college or university, schools can establish links with the broader community. For example, they might collaborate with dance or music schools or other art and athletic groups. Similarly, they might partner with the international community or religious and/or multicultural groups. These collaborations might provide opportunities for the school and the faculty to further develop their skills—as both teachers and learners—and to become recognized in the larger community.

Seeking Consultation to Obtain Perspective

Leading faculty to a position of greater autonomy and creativity is a demanding task, an often lonely task. Heads might consider retaining an organizational consultant to work with them directly and, at the head's designation, to work with key administrators. Ideally, the consultant should have no other affiliation with the school. He or she should be well-grounded in systems theory, experienced and knowledgeable about independent schools, knowledgeable about child development, and highly confidential. A skilled consultant can help the head understand the strengths and struggles and interpersonal dynamics within the school. The consultant can help him or her clarify and articulate a vision for the school, set goals, identify obstacles to the achievement of these goals, and develop strategies for overcoming them.

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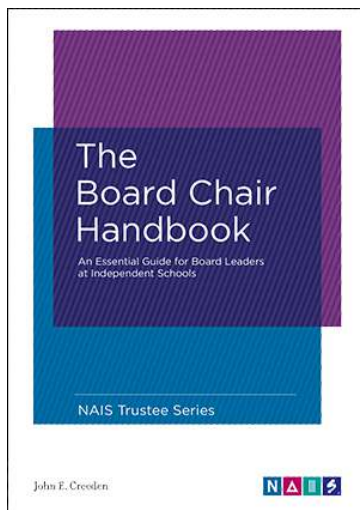
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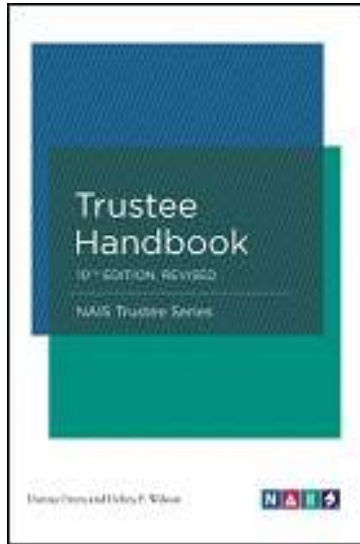
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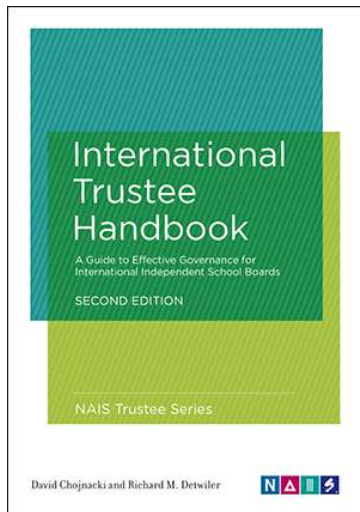
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