
LEADING TRENDS

Congratulations on the New Headship!

Now what?



Whether experiencing it as a first-time head of school or as an experienced head starting at a new institution, the transition into the chief leadership role is demanding and daunting. The role and its responsibilities can be exhilarating and exhausting, intimidating and inspiring, often simultaneously. There are countless areas of focus, and all of them are important. Logic and experience dictate that individual bandwidth is limited

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– while we may yearn for more hours in the day, for the foreseeable future we are stuck with the same old 24. We also know that new heads of school have a limited period to establish themselves as the school's leader. How do successful heads prioritize their efforts when starting a new position? While there are many important areas on which new heads can focus, there are three that stand out to us as being particularly important to ensuring sustainable success: Building relationships and understanding a school's culture; Displaying strategic leadership and vision; productively working with the board of trustees.

Building relationships and understanding a school's culture. For new heads, little is more important than establishing positive, productive relationships with school stakeholders. Successful heads of school dedicate the time and effort necessary to

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get to know parents, students, faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees personally, learning about their hopes and fears while demonstrating empathy and support. Related to this is the necessity of immersing oneself in the culture of a school, to truly understand what ‘makes a place tick.’ There is a reason leadership scholar Peter Drucker famously said that “culture eats strategy for breakfast,” and your best ideas may fail to gain traction without a solid grasp of the culture you are joining. Learning the culture of a school is an intentional exercise that requires considerable time and effort. Observing the

movements and interactions of stakeholders, assessing physical spaces and symbols in a school, and implementing climate surveys and listening tours are all effective ways for a new head to understand the culture of a school. It's only after gaining a broad understanding of a school's culture, its traditions, history, and values, that a new head can lead effectively making decisions that align with the school's ethos.

Displaying strategic leadership and vision. Articulating a compelling vision for a school's future is essential for guiding its direction and ensuring sustainability. In antiquity, two decades ago, heads new to their schools were commonly advised to

spend the first year getting to know the school while avoiding tackling anything big as long as possible. Above all, the conventional wisdom held, heads should avoid embarking on a strategic plan until their second year at the earliest. However, one of two scenarios will likely be true: the school created a new strategic plan just before launching the search, often with the pending leadership transition in mind, or it has been several years since the last round of strategy-making and there is pent-up demand to get started as soon as possible on developing a new framework. In either case, there is an expectation from the school community that the new head will hit the ground running on something.

First, working with the board of trustees and administrative team and perhaps other stakeholders, a new head should facilitate a review or refinement of the school's strategic plan. This is the time to assess if change agendas are already in place and/or stakeholders have pent-up demand for new initiatives or programs. Then, resource allocation can be prioritized effectively with adaptation to changing environmental circumstances while maintaining fidelity to the school's mission. Taking charge of strategic leadership by a new head instills confidence in the community, which recognizes and appreciates an informed, confident, and steady hand at the helm.

Productively working with the Board of Trustees (hint: it's about being a strategic partner, not an employee). Productive engagement with a school's board of trustees facilitates effective leadership and strategic governance, both of which are critical to a school's success and long-term viability. While in the legal sense the relationship between the board and head of school is that of employer/employee, a strict adherence to that framework is not congruent with the culture and values of most independent and international schools. A more effective metaphor can be found in the words of Berkshire Hathaway's Warren Buffet and Charlie Munger, writing in 1996: "Although our form is corporate, our attitude is partnership." As partners, it is the responsibility of the head and the board chair to focus the time, attention, and efforts of the board and senior administrative team. Even before their first day on the job, new heads should work with the board to clarify collective expectations for their first year. These can be shared with the community through big-picture, strategic initiatives that provide a roadmap for the year ahead. Heads must regularly work

closely with the board to ensure continuing alignment of and progress on expectations and initiatives. One of the most reliable indicators of a school's health (and prognosis for long-term success) can be found in the dynamics of the relationship between the head and the board. New heads must establish a productive partnership early and nurture it regularly. The benefits reaped will be huge and long-lasting.

How Triangle Associates Supports Heads of School

We want to partner with you as you assume your leadership role in a new school. Our decades of experience, paired with deep knowledge of private, independent, international, and higher education, puts us in a unique position to help you provide the exceptional leadership that will allow your school to adapt, change, and thrive. We dive deep to immerse ourselves in understanding our clients' organizations, which allows us to provide big-picture strategies and actionable recommendations that strengthen all aspects of an institution.

Transitions are difficult on multiple levels. Contact us now to learn more about how we help make the leadership part easier.

- Strategic review and planning.
- Leadership team workshops and development.
- Governance seminars.
- Enrollment analysis.
- Market research, inside and outside the school.
- Executive coaching.

How We Help Schools

Triangle Associates solves governance problems, keeps boards on track, guides strategy formulation, and develops senior leaders for private, independent schools around the world. See our [web site](#) for more information and a partial list of clients.

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Thanks, and feel free to [contact us](#). We hope to work with you soon.

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