

“ A true team both
defines its objectives and
finds ways to meet them. ”
— Sally Helgensen

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CHAPTER 8

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BOARD CHAIR AND THE HEAD

AS THE CHAIR OF THE BOARD, you understand that there is no more important factor in the success of the school than the relationship between the chair and head of school. You make central to your beliefs and actions the knowledge that together these individuals share — and model — leadership and governance and determine all that follows.

As is true of the relationship between the head and all trustees, here too there are both formal and informal roles, responsibilities specific to head and chair, and responsibilities that are shared. It is therefore crucial that the chair and head make every effort to establish a solid and supportive relationship of candor and trust, develop the capacity to be mutually critical, and learn from each other's feedback — all with the goal of making their work on behalf of the school most effective.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHAIR IN RELATION TO THE BOARD

As board chair,
what are my
priorities?

- The chair takes the lead in areas of board leadership and management. The head, serving as the equivalent of a CEO, takes the lead in curriculum, school operations, etc. Together they model the leadership relationship in action.
- The chair speaks for the board unless the task is delegated to someone else for a specific purpose. The chair is wise to let the head speak on behalf of the school on most occasions.
- The chair is the ultimate authority, along with the rest of the trustees.
- The chair serves as the leader and manager of the board and ensures that:
 - the board does not overstep its limits;
 - the agendas for the board and executive committee meetings are developed in consultation with the head and sent out in advance of the meetings;
 - proper research is done on all issues, when necessary;
 - all issues are considered in a deliberative process; and
 - ample time is allocated for discussion.
- The chair usually leads the process for evaluating the head.
- The chair makes sure that the annual board self-assessment and the evaluation of the chair take place.
- The chair consults regularly with the head to anticipate and strategize issues, concerns, and priorities.
- The chair is a ready and willing listener to the head's concerns as they emerge; he or she serves as a major adviser.
- The chair is a private confidante and critic when necessary. The chair is the head's No. 1 public advocate.
- The chair participates in the process of trustee selection and ensures that the head has an opportunity to participate also and to review potential candidates and officers.
- The chair makes sure that trustee orientation occurs.
- The chair organizes the board in the most effective way to conduct its business, including the work of the executive committee.
- The chair provides particular oversight and direction to the school finances and resource management.
- The chair involves his or her successor in discussions to ensure a smooth transition at the conclusion of the current chair's term. Bringing the new chair up to speed is crucial to the health of the board and the school.

- The chair accepts the responsibility to be the disciplinarian of the board when necessary and is willing to help counsel unproductive, disruptive, and counterproductive trustees off the board.
- The chair is willing to put in the time it takes to do all of these things. For most NAIS member school chairs, this task averages four to five hours a week over the course of the school year. Because the chair's responsibilities do not take a vacation, the chair will probably have to devote time to these issues during the summer months as well.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HEAD IN THE CHAIR-HEAD RELATIONSHIP

- As the executive in charge of implementing policy and meeting goals, the head is responsible for the school's daily operations.
- The head informs and advises the chair through regular formal reports and in a number of informal ways.

JOINT RESPONSIBILITIES

- Together the chair and head articulate the school's mission and vision.
- Together they share responsibility for planning and regularly reviewing and evaluating current plans.
- Together they, along with the treasurer, oversee resource allocation.
- Together they remain aware that sometimes there will be areas in which lines of responsibility blur, and they maintain open communication to help determine when joint presence and decision-making are most appropriate.
- Together they present a united front on all positions to the board, the school, and the larger community.
- Together they serve on all committees as members *ex officio* or "ex officio without a vote," as they both have the greatest depth and breadth of knowledge about the school and all of its constituencies.

Cyril Houle, an expert on board-CEO relations, has noted some other instructive differences in the two positions:

Comparing the Roles of the Board, the Board Chair, and the Chief Executive

The Board	The Chair	The Head
Is corporate; can act only as a group	Cannot officially act alone	Is an individual
Exists continuously even as its membership changes	Changes often in many schools	Is temporary in the life of the school
Is part-time	Is part-time	Is full-time
Has little or no staff	Has little or no staff	Has access to all staff
Holds ultimate responsibility (along with the chair)	Holds ultimate responsibility (along with the full board)	Holds limited, immediate responsibility
Typically is not an expert in education	Typically is not an expert in education	Typically is an expert in education
Volunteer	Volunteer	Salaried
Sees only parts of the whole	Needs to be able to see the big picture	Is intimately involved in everything

ACKNOWLEDGING THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP CHANGE AND TURNOVER

How do we ensure that the transition from one board chair to the next is a smooth one?

In their efforts to minimize the effect of leadership change on the school's forward momentum, board chairs and committees on trustees should be especially alert to the need for long-range planning for leadership succession. Who is best qualified to be the next board chair? What are his or her other commitments? Is he or she available? Who is a good alternative? Who's after that? Who will chair the capital campaign? Who will chair the committee on trustees, and when?

Every time a new chair steps on board, a school faces a critical moment. Since the current trend is for chairs to remain in office a very few years (30 percent for one year and 28 percent for two years), the chair often lacks sufficient time to get to know the job and all he or she needs to know about the school.* Many step down just as the learning curve begins to

* *The State of Independent School Governance*. (Washington, DC: NAIS, 2006) page 8.

flatten out, leaving a new chair to start all over again. A head has to learn to dance with a new partner every time the chair changes.

Heads' average tenure is now nine years, according to NAIS research in 2006–2007. Although a number of heads may stay at one school for 15 or 20 years or even longer, many others — as much as a third of NAIS heads today — have moved on to a second or third headship. They carry a lot of cumulative experience, but from different schools. It is common for heads who have been in the same place for six or seven years to find that none of the current trustees were there when the heads started. No one remembers why the heads were selected or what was the process for determining long-range goals or shared accomplishments. It is possible that no one even agrees with those goals anymore. Even with a good strategic plan in place, it is hard for leaders to move the school forward when so little continuity exists.

It is a sad fact that many heads' unplanned departures in recent years stem from unplanned leadership changes, especially at the board chair level. These departures are inevitably disruptive to the school as parents, teachers, and students, as well as graduates and the broader world beyond the school, hold their breath and wait to see what will happen next. Anxiety goes up. Enrollment, fund raising, and faculty, student, and parent morale may go down for a period.

An earlier edition of this handbook noted:

Because the head and chair are partners, the premature resignation of a head is usually a sad reflection on the performance of the board chair. They succeed or fail together. If chair and head differ too greatly in style to be able to work together, the chair should consider resigning.

There is no clearer way to make the point today.

Each independent school is different, and so are its leaders. What works for one school or pair of leaders may not be comfortable for others. But for the sake of all constituents, it is important that head and chair try to maintain a consistent pattern of shared leadership to avoid sending mixed signals.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

To help these key school leaders learn best practices, NAIS established Leadership through Partnership, an annual workshop for heads and chairs in which the team spends two days hearing from outside experts, gaining

practical knowledge, sharing experiences with colleagues from other schools, and especially getting to know each other in a more profound way. This is so difficult to do with the hectic schedules of the head and chair back home. Leadership through Partnership is particularly valuable when either the chair or head is new to his or her position.

Each year at that workshop, heads have the opportunity to meet in small peer groups, while chairs do the same. To get troublesome issues out in the open, facilitators provide thought-provoking questions such as “What is your pet peeve about your partner?” Interestingly, the answers from each group remain constant from year to year — but they are not, as one might anticipate, directly complementary.

THE FIRST RULE: NO SURPRISES

How much do I
need to share?

Board chairs are frequently concerned that heads do not communicate enough. This is noteworthy because heads often worry that they inundate chairs with information. Some heads are more deliberate about withholding information, but in general such a policy is apt to lead to misunderstanding or even trouble. How much communication is desired, how often, by what means, and when and where to share it will vary from school to school. The important thing is for head and board chair to answer the questions together. (Boarding schools may well depend heavily on e-mails, faxes, and a weekly or biweekly phone call; day schools may need e-mails, faxes, and perhaps more phone calls and more face-to-face meetings.)

For both parties, the first rule of communication is this: *No surprises*. A chair should know about major disciplinary incidents; faculty morale (up? down? why?); a new teacher who is shaky but getting special mentoring help; staff dismissals; trustee children who are not accepted at any of their college choices or into the chair’s very own school. And, obviously, the head needs to immediately communicate serious matters — such as a breaking news story or a tragedy — to the chair and then to all trustees, if appropriate. By getting the bad news quickly and from the highest level, the board chair can help strategize the head’s response as needed.

The need to know corresponds to the need to be well prepared. When in doubt, the head should pick up the phone and the chair should willingly accept the call. Most often, the message requires no action from the chair, but the chair needs the information to be able to field phone calls from others and allay fears and rumors. Information sharing can also help the chair understand the pattern of daily life for the head.

Of course, the head should also share good news. A chair should get the first call (after the donor and the campaign chair) to rejoice in the school's first million-dollar gift, to learn that the middle school has performed 1,000 hours of community service, to be told that a teacher has been selected for a Klingenstein fellowship. Indeed, the head should share good news with all trustees. In return, the chair should share positive comments from people inside and outside the school community.

DISCIPLINING TRUSTEES: A JOB FOR THE CHAIR

A common pet peeve about board chairs is a very specific one: "I have a chair who will not discipline a maverick trustee." This person could be a renegade who stirs up trouble by ordering the staff around or by communicating inappropriately with other members of the board and the community. Most often, it is a trustee with a particular agenda, someone unwilling to work within established parameters.

The trustee who behaves inappropriately can be very damaging to the school, particularly if allowed to continue unchecked. In extreme cases, the chair may have to ask for a resignation or even take steps to remove a reluctant trustee. Often, however, a candid conversation will change the trustee's tactics. This is a conversation the chair should initiate and hold, not the head.

Doing this is hard, of course. The chair may say, "How can I discipline volunteers? They give their time and their money." Or "I didn't agree to do this when I signed up to be chair. Let's just let him ride out his term." Or "Maybe we can give her part of what she wants."

But no. The chair must intervene to head off, or stop, the problem.

Why is this my job as chair?

TEAMWORK METAPHORS FOR HEAD AND CHAIR

Students of governance have proposed many images to describe the relationship between head and chair. Many of these images derive from the world of sports, where teamwork is so important. Let's look at three metaphors, each of which has something to offer a head and chair whether they are embarking on a new relationship or continuing an existing one.

Tell me about teamwork between head and chair.

1. A THREE-LEGGED RACE

To perform well in this race, the partners must agree on the pace they will set, who will stride forward with which leg, and in which direction they will go. If they are not in agreement, one will fall and both will be set back.

2. TENNIS DOUBLES

The older metaphor of tennis singles — where the chair tackles all policy issues on one side of a clearly defined barrier as the head tackles all management issues on the other side — was inadequate. True, there are some clear lines between the role of the board and the chair and between the role of the administration and the head. But the lines are never so clear that everything on one side is unquestionably the board's business and everything on the other is the head's.

Many decisions require the best possible joint thinking, strategy, and action. Sometimes circumstances necessitate shared action. As in doubles, on occasion one player may need to take several shots in a row at the baseline or the net, even crossing over briefly into the other partner's space before returning to his or her own.

In some cases, local culture or circumstance may dictate that a chair take the lead on certain decisions even though normally the head would handle them. Chair and head must agree to respect each other's basic responsibilities — but they must also agree to avoid letting formal structure override common sense in specific instances. As in tennis, the partners who after a time are willing to critique each other's games while reducing points of friction are the ones who learn from experience and become a winning team.

3. THE CATCHER-PITCHER RELATIONSHIP

Yogi Berra, the famous New York Yankee catcher, once noted in the *New York Times* that spectators often think a catcher plays a secondary role in a pitcher's performance. "Pitchers," he wrote in a tone some board chairs may find familiar, "think they know everything." Obviously, neither pitchers nor heads of school know everything, even if they are experts on most of what is happening. The catcher's role is to suggest strategies about what to do when and how. Just as a pitcher can shake off a catcher's suggestion to throw a certain way, so can a head choose to "call the pitches." However, the wise head takes in and responds to good counsel from a good board chair.

Berra also said that a further responsibility of the catcher is to know “which guys to yell at and which you have to just pet.” Of course, we are not recommending that a board chair either yell at or coddle a head of school. However, there are times when the chair must take the lead in encouraging, or discouraging, a head from continuing on the present course. Like the pitcher, the head is usually most visible as the leader. But like the catcher, the chair can make the team more effective by serving as ongoing strategist and coach. Metaphorically speaking, the chair can occasionally walk out to the mound to calm a head who made two or three bad pitches in a row or even schedule a longer talk off the field when there’s a losing streak. How effectively the catcher does this can help determine whether the team enjoys a winning game or even a winning season. The same is true for the most effective board chairs.

As the board chair, you accept the role of coach, confidante, strategist, friendly critic, and No. 1 supporter of the head.

THE CHAIR AS OFFICIAL NURTURER OF THE HEAD

In addition to fulfilling the official responsibility to share information with a head, the chair must also be a major sustainer of a head’s health and morale, even when the head has a supportive circle of family and friends. There are many ways to do this. The chair could provide a pair of tickets to the symphony, offer a beach house for the weekend, or suggest (or insist) that the head stay out of the office for two weeks at a time over the winter and spring breaks and for a full month in the summer.

The head knows I care. Why do I have to say so?

Board chairs should also be aware that heads have lives outside of school and that at certain times family issues may take precedence over school issues. It is vital to recognize the need to have a support network for the head, who people too often assume should be willing to give 100 percent to the school. This need for support is a real one for the head, and acknowledging it comes with the territory for a board chair who plays a nurturing role.

THE CHAIR AS COMMUNICATOR OF A SERIOUS MESSAGE

How do we handle bad news?

From time to time, the board chair may have to share with the head bad news that is substantive and significant. It may be about something the head has done or not done or something that has not been well received by some person or part of the school community. If the news is important, the chair should share it with the head as soon as possible — not wait for an annual evaluation.

This is not the kind of conversation to hold on the run or in a phone call. It deserves time and space of its own. The head needs a chance to reply immediately and perhaps more formally several days later, maybe after uncovering more information to help distinguish between fact and rumor. The perceived errors may be ones of omission or of commission.

After sharing the concern and hearing the head's response, the chair and head should strategize together to make sure they have a plan to resolve the present issue and minimize the chance of a recurrence. In most cases, the problem can be resolved and, with the chair's visible support, the relationship and the school can continue to move forward.

In rarer situations, a series of such conversations indicates to the head that the entire board believes it is time for the school to seek a new head for the year after next. In that final year, it is the special job of the board chair to ensure that the head can leave with a sense of dignity, clarity, and completion.

The essential elements in all such communication are trust, respect, candor, and a willingness to work to make the relationship better — and to help the school become more effective.

As board chair, you accept the responsibility to work with the head to resolve differences and problems throughout the head's tenure. As board chair, you understand the importance of clear, mutually established goals to the head's annual evaluation, to the board's evaluation, and to your own. As board chair, you understand that in accepting the leadership of the board, you make a serious commitment of mind and heart to the school and the head. You will work hard with the head and share, and enjoy, the challenge.

CASE STUDY

NEW HEAD, NEW METHODS

Thomas Stephens leaves a successful headship after eight years in a K–8 country day school and takes a new position as head of a K–12 day school in another state. His experiences as a skillful leader in his previous school and as a trustee of his state association of independent schools were clear factors in his appointment. He is nationally known for his close work with his several board chairs in implementing new models for board organization, particularly in reducing and streamlining board committees and increasing the number of ad hoc task forces to create more meaningful work for the board.

At the new school, Thomas and the board chair start the process of moving in this direction with the new board. Together they create two task forces, one focusing on technology and another on diversity issues. At the same time, they suspend the previous practice of having each committee report at each board meeting.

In late winter, the board chair unexpectedly takes a new job in a new city, so the vice chair takes over. The new chair, an alumna of the Class of 1957, learned her trusteeship in the traditional model, where board committees parallel the internal organization of the school (education, buildings and grounds, finance, etc.). That is the model she is comfortable with. She believes “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” and says she has heard from several trustees that they miss the opportunity to report on their committee work at each meeting. In her regular meeting with Thomas in early February, she tells him she has agreed to disband the task forces and return to the previous board organization. This is the first Thomas has heard of this turnaround.

What are the issues?

What should the head do?

What should the board do?

What should the chair do?

CASE STUDY

ADMINISTRATIVE EVALUATIONS: WHOSE BUSINESS ARE THEY, ANYWAY?

At the recommendation of an ISACS Visiting Team, this year Blackstone School has begun a formal evaluation program for all administrators, including the school head, Arthur Atwells. Arthur has met with the chair of the committee on trustees to review his own evaluation and, subsequently, with board chair Barbara Thayer to talk about the whole process.

During the course of the meeting, he shares with Barbara the results of the evaluations of the division heads, deans, and department heads. A week later at the full board meeting, the topic of administrative evaluation is on the agenda. After a report on Arthur's evaluation, he is surprised to see Barbara preparing to hand around a stack of papers to the board.

"They're copies of the other administrators' reviews," Barbara explains. "I thought the board should have a look at them, especially since it's the first time we've gone through this."

"I really don't think that's appropriate," says Arthur. But several trustees, all of

whom are parents in the school, are eager to see the material. As one says, "It's about time we got a chance to see how some of those people are really performing."

Arthur finally says, "I have to tell you that I consider this an inappropriate infringement on my responsibilities to hire and evaluate staff. I cannot accept this discussion and if it continues, I will have to leave the meeting and consider my options."

"Let's call a recess and discuss this," Barbara responds. The two head for Arthur's office, taking the stack of evaluations with them.

What are the issues?

What should Arthur and Barbara say to one another?

What should they say to the board?

This case study is by Richard Barbieri.

RESOURCES

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