

Hiring Leaders Who Will Succeed in Times of Crisis

(Author's note: While this article primarily references heads of schools, much of it can also apply to the hiring of senior administrators and faculty members.)

As a former Head of School, I have immense empathy for the challenges current heads are facing in 2020. In addition to those ever-present “come with the turf” decisions, heads also are the voices for their school communities on responses to the coronavirus pandemic and to the multitude of questions arising out of the Black Lives Matter movement. And 2020 is not yet done. And these issues will continue beyond 2020. And others will undoubtedly arise.

The work of the Head of School is seldom more visible, or more broadly judged, than during these times. Many have shined in this spotlight, while others have not. How much of this was predictable? To what extent can the ability of heads to effectively lead their schools through times of crisis be traced back to the search process by which the head was selected? Here are some thoughts on this.

We know that school heads are expected to wear many hats, including academic administrator, non-profit CEO, chief hirer/firer, fundraiser, etc. In the head search process, it is fairly common that Boards of Trustees and school communities will primarily focus on a candidate's readiness to wear these hats successfully. There are fairly standard interview questions that search committees ask to ferret out one's skill set in these areas, and equally to learn basic, but not complex, thoughts on the ideal relations between the head and the board, or the parents, or the direct reports. But how does a search more carefully ascertain if someone can be an effective community leader?

The most successful heads are those who can lead their schools not just in ordinary times but also through times of crisis and disruption. It's one thing for heads to be effective administrators, but what happens when the community needs the head to set its “moral compass?” It is a fact of life in general, and school life in particular, that crises will either divide or unite us. The direction there will mostly be determined by the ability of leadership to forge a path.

In the search process, examination of a candidate's academic “chops” and financial acumen are absolutely imperative, but they are only part of the picture. Search committees need to look more deeply to determine a candidate's “True North” and his or her capacity to thrive in turmoil. Here is how this might be better done:

- *The people most responsible for hiring cannot spend too much time with the prime candidates.* Most schools try to make finalist visits very inclusive, so that all affected constituent groups get to interact with candidates. That's fine, but often, in a two-day schedule, this comes at the expense of the key decision makers spending as much time as they should with the candidate. I have even heard search committees ask why they need to interview a candidate at the finalist stage, when they already had enough time

during an interview earlier in the process. There really is no such thing as “enough time” to get to know someone well.

- *Smaller settings will reveal more about a candidate than large forums.* Yes, it is important to see how a candidate does on his/her feet in front of a crowd, as that is an important aspect of the head’s job. But most of the essential decisions a head will make take place in smaller give-and-take conversations. In these settings, is the candidate a good listener? Is there appreciation for different perspectives? Is there warmth and self-reflection? What are the foundational principles of his/her decision making? Is there an ability to find clarity in the gray?
- *Dig more deeply during interviews.* Too often interview questions are “how” and “what” questions about someone’s experience and skills. To truly ascertain someone’s leadership potential, these need to be followed up with “why” or “what if” questions. The best interviews move from a question/answer format into conversations with a healthy back-and-forth exchange of ideas, thoughts, and reactions.
- *Comprehensive reference checking is a must.* Past performance is the best predictor of the future. Search consultants and search committees need to probe deeply with those who can best evaluate how the candidate has fared in prior positions. Yes, there are standard reference check questions that need to be asked, but more probing questions will help unveil the candidate’s potential to lead when the sledding is toughest. Every head of school will have to make decisions that are unpopular. How are those decisions reached? How are they communicated? How does this person respond to those unhappy with the decisions? How does s/he react to a crisis?

Our best wishes of support go to all the heads who are leading their schools through these very challenging times. We hope most heads will earn strong community backing for their efforts. Others may be found not up to the task or may even decide that this work is not what they signed up for. Lessons will be learned, and one of these will be the importance of conducting a head of school search that looks more carefully at the beneath-the-surface qualities that distinguish great school leaders from those who struggle when their communities most need them.

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