
LEADING TRENDS

The Art of Departmental Leadership



Flying over the Southeastern USA between Houston and Charlotte at dusk on a clear, warm summer evening, the view out the window is one of haze. Structures on the ground are visible just below the airplane, but everything becomes blurred and gray as one's gaze shifts to the distance. The region's famous humidity creates a gradient of visibility that renders no clear boundary between what is discernible and what is opaque.

Something similar is often true for the intersection of governance

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and management in private, independent schools. The boundary line seems elusive amid the hazy opacity rendered by today's complex challenges and opportunities. Board members struggle to figure out what is in their bailiwick while heads of school often assume greater clarity than actually exists. Because so much is in the "messy middle," where those governing and managing schools must reach agreement or compromise, boards and heads alike sometimes fall victim to assuming greater clarity than actually exists.

“We are mindful that the chair’s role is, in many instances, ambiguous and conflicted. Chairs can feel like neither fish nor fowl, not really administrators but not totally in the faculty world ... We think that what chairs may lack in overt power—say to hire and fire—they make up for in the influence they have to shape departmental conversations and agendas.”

As pervasive as we find the tendency to over-assume among boards and heads in domestic independent schools, it is even more present in international schools where different cultural backgrounds foster conflicting notions of what constitutes good governance. These conflicts usually erupt post hoc, after the assumption has already been made and actions taken to which another party takes umbrage. It is as if an issue--say who should decide on a particular matter--rests out there in the haze, close enough that some details are discernible but far enough that assumptions can still be made that complete the picture.

Assumptions of agreement can expedite a board meeting; It takes time to "mine for conflict," to use Pat Lencioni's phrase, and time is in precious short supply. But this is exactly what must happen if boards and heads are to avoid tripping over

assumptive errors. Ask questions instead of making assumptions--questioning is the antithesis of assuming. For example, you can ask "Am I understanding you correctly?" or "Is this what you mean?" Taking care to not let expedition get in the way, the board chair or head can restate an assumed agreement and probe others for their understandings.

Maybe the most fundamental question one can ask is "Who decides," seeking clarity about whether a matter is being discussed for the board to decide (with head of school advice), or the head to decide (with board advice), or whether a meeting of the minds is necessary (the middle zone on the NAIS graphic). Effectively handling the boundary between governance and management is an ongoing process that requires clear communication and well-defined roles, but good behavior will only go so far. Inevitably, there will be surprises, confusion, and maybe even disagreement about where to draw the line. In such moments, we find that reaffirming a strong shared commitment to the organization's mission and goals can lead to compromise instead of impasse.

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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