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Trustee *focus*

ADDRESSING KEY ISSUES FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOL TRUSTEES AND PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR A SECURE

The Christian School's Greatest Need. This is part one of a three part series on developing the school's leadership team. Part two will focus on the benefits of head of school evaluation and part three on mentoring the head.

A Call for Stability in Leadership

By John Schimmer, Ed.D.

It has been my wonderful privilege to consult with a significant number of Christian school administrators and school boards during my tenure as an employee of ACSI. Unfortunately, I did not perceive that Christian school boards placed a high priority on **growing** their most important employee, the Chief Education Officer (CEO), commonly titled headmaster, administrator or superintendent.

Evaluation of the School Head

Furthermore, it is my observation that many boards do not have a written governance policy which mandates that the board provide a written evaluation of their CEO at least once every year. When the board finally decides to do an evaluation, it usually stems from a

school crisis or from having received a number of complaints about the administrator's performance. At this point, the outcome of the evaluation is usually a negative 'report card,' followed by the board concluding that it's time for new leadership. Thusly, the administrator takes the rap because the board has not done its job of communicating effectively with their one employee. (The board directly hires and provides oversight for only one employee in the organization, the school head.)

Christian school leadership has always been quite fragile. In 1974, when I first attended the National Institute for Christian School Administrators, I learned that the average tenure for a Christian school



administrator was, at best, four years. This average may be somewhat higher today (I have not seen a new statistic in several years), but we still have a dismal retention record for schools which claim to place a high priority on excellence, and where we strive to be Christ-honoring in our actions.

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In the fall of 2006, I visited the campus of Deerfield Academy, one of the most prestigious private school academies in New England, if not in all of North America. While in the campus bookstore, a friend and colleague encouraged me to purchase a copy of *The Headmaster*, a biography of Frank L. Boyden, by John McPhee.

Frank Boyden had been the headmaster of Deerfield Academy for sixty-four years. He was hired at the age of twenty-two and continued to be the headmaster until he was eighty-six.

McPhee describes Boyden as a simple man, inconspicuous, standing only 5'-4" tall, fragile looking and having an uncommanding voice. Hardly the type boards are looking for today, but it was most interesting to note that twenty-nine of the "Boyden boys" later became headmasters of elite New England prep schools and scores of graduates entered the teaching profession.

My calling your attention to Frank

Boyden is not meant to infer that the academy board did a wonderful job of mentoring Boyden, but I would assume they gave him a lot of support and encouragement. In fact, they must have *empowered* him which, at least in part, contributed to his successful career. Surely everyone wasn't always delighted with his leadership. There must have been a few upset parents from time to time, who may have even called for his dismissal. A twenty-two year old, even a forty-two year old school master is bound to have bungled or botched a few things along the way, but the board was patient and allowed him to stay, grow, and develop into, as McPhee stated, "one of the greatest headmasters in history" (p.7).

Stability of leadership and longevity of staff must be one of the highest goals of a school board. Committing to an annual evaluation of the CEO is only the first step, but it is a crucial one. School board literature consistently states that boards have resisted, even feared this responsibility. Some have punted the ball by getting others to do it for them.

"Stability of leadership and longevity of staff must be one of the highest goals of a school board"

Board consultant and trainer, John Carver wrote, "Don't commission a group of citizens to evaluate the CEO for you... Don't ask the staff, public, customers, clients, parents or students what they think of your CEO's performance. The CEO doesn't work for the staff or the public, but for the board. Boards sometimes want others to do their work for them" (p.9).

Doug Eadie, in *Extraordinary Board Leadership*, cites a CEO who stated, "It's like pulling teeth to get them [the

board] to even talk about [my evaluation], much less to do it."

Eadie continues,

Boards generally avoid formally evaluating their CEOs, and when they do perform some kind of an evaluation, it is more often than not in my experience shallow and perfunctory... many boards conduct evaluations sporadically, focus on isolated episodes and behavior rather than on overall patterns of performance, and do not employ explicit, objective, and mutually agreed-upon evaluation criteria. (p.99)

Evaluation is a Force for Positive Growth

The process of annually evaluating the CEO, coupled with the board's own self-evaluation is good for the board, good for the CEO, and good for the school. Where applicable, it is also good for the sponsoring church. Everyone wins when the board places evaluation as a high priority of governance. This will be developed in **Part 2**, which will appear in the April edition of *The Director's Desk*.

Cited Works

- Carver, John, *Board Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996.
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