Executive Leadership: The Relationships Between Predictability and Support, the School Head’s Well-Being, and Faculty Culture

Through the first two articles, we established that charismatic (but not excessively extroverted) leaders who guide schools with greater enrollment demand scored higher on our executive leadership measure. Of course, this assumes the school has a strategic plan and a strategic financial plan. In this article, we examine the factors that lead to high scoring on the executive leadership measure (Stability Marker No. 3). In other words, what are the major contributors to being a high-quality leader?

Two variables made significant and unique contributions to School Head scores on executive leadership. Executive leadership was best predicted by the following equation.

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\text{Executive Leadership} = \text{Faculty Culture} + \text{Predictability & Support with the Board}
\]

\[R = .57, R^2 = .33, p < .001\]

In our original Head research, we defined a high-quality school leader as one who supports and sustains a healthy faculty culture. Accordingly, our current measure of executive leadership was conceived to examine the leadership traits and points of emphasis that are most closely related to cultivating a healthy faculty culture. We predicted we would find a relationship between executive leadership and faculty culture. We confirmed this prediction and our previous research.

“Predictability and support” (P&$S$) has become an essential component of a high-functioning school and is important in multiple cultural spheres. A faculty culture that is so grounded, it is associated with better student performance, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. We hypothesized this concept would extend to the Board-Head relationship. To assess P&$S$ with the Board, we asked School Heads to respond to a six-item inventory and rate their agreement with the following statements on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

- The Board is supportive of me and my plans for the school’s future.
- I understand exactly how I am evaluated by the Board.
- My annual evaluation by the Board is constructive.
- I receive accurate positive reinforcement regarding my performance as School Head.
- I am able to accurately predict the Board’s reaction to any given topic.
- I am able to accurately predict the Board President’s reaction to any given topic.

The retention of “Predictability and Support” with the Board in the prediction of scores on executive leadership confirms and extends the concept of P&$S$ to the Board-Head relationship. The retention further emphasizes its importance through the Head’s evaluation process and through ongoing supportive conversations. We recommend that School Heads and Boards reflect on these items and seek ways to increase P&$S$ within the Board-Head relationship, and more specifically:

- use the school’s quadrennial strategic plan and strategic financial plan, as well as the School Head’s operational initiatives, to establish the administrative operations agenda (“agenda”);
- establish a Head Support and Evaluation Committee (HSEC) that supports the School Head in executing the agenda items; and
- complete (the School Head and HSEC together) document establishing the essential expectations and agenda items on which the School Head will be evaluated that year.

The Head’s Influence on Faculty Culture

We expected and found faculty culture to be a significant term in the equation predicting executive leadership. The research helps us understand the School Head characteristics that relate to a healthy faculty culture. With faculty culture as the predictor variable, nearly a quarter of the variance of faculty’s perception of faculty culture was accounted for by the School Head assessment of their own “means of support,” and scores on a measure of flourishing and well-being. Consider the following equation.

\[
\text{Faculty Culture} = \text{Head’s Means of Support} + \text{Flourishing}
\]

\[R = .47, R^2 = .43, p < .01\]

The School Head position can be a lonely one with no on-campus peers and limited ability to form school relationships because of the intrinsic conflict in those relationships. This may result in a limited ability to benefit from the “checks and balances” that come from working through ideas with others, and increased levels of stress associated with the challenge of leadership. We measured this support via a four-item inventory.

- I have at least one close friend in the industry that I can talk to about work-related issues.
- I have a mentor or coach who works with me regularly.
- I belong to a group, formally or informally, that meets regularly and helps me work through my school’s issues.
- My Board has a Head Support and Evaluation Committee by name or by function.

Our finding here suggests that professional support will contribute to the Head’s efforts in leading a healthy faculty culture. In this study, the modal number of supports the respondents reported was two and 20% reported having all four means of
support. Nearly one in four had either zero or only one of these supports. This suggests that for a significant number of School Heads, establishing greater external support can improve both the Head's executive leadership and the associated faculty culture.

The School Head's emotional well-being has an impact on the faculty culture. This is consistent with the research on “emotional contagion,” where the leader’s emotional functioning and attitude has a significant impact on those who follow.\(^5\)

Martin Seligman defined “well-being” through the acronym PERMA.\(^6\) He posited that the Positive Affect, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement experienced by a person determines his or her well-being. The Deiner Flourishing Scale\(^7\) measures these essential aspects of PERMA, and is the measure of a person’s well-being. In our study, leaders who scored higher on a measure of flourishing also had stronger faculty cultures. This suggests that School Head investment of time and resources in his or her own well-being makes strategic sense since it is simultaneously investing in the school’s culture. This concept is difficult for many leaders who find themselves overcommitted to their schools and see that commitment as part of their vocation and service, even when it negatively impacts their personal and family lives. Their well-being may take a backseat to getting their job done.

We conclude here that the School Head’s emotional well-being, amount of P&Ss experienced with the Board, and quantity of important outside professional supports all impact-leadership skills and the resulting faculty culture. Given the centrality of both the quality of the executive leader and faculty culture in driving school outcomes, including enrollment demand and student success, it is essential that the definition of a quality executive school leader now includes “flourishing” as an element. For that to occur, it is foundational that the School Head cultivate relationships with supportive professional colleagues and for the Board-Head relationships to be steeped in predictability and support.\(^{1-5}\)

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3. See “School Head Leadership: Results From ISM’s Follow-up Study,” I&P, 30-10-39.