Great leaders can transform a school and take it to new heights, whereas poor leaders can cause great challenges for schools. We have long asserted that, as the executive leader, your “style” does not seem to account for the differences in organizational performance. Nonetheless, you are a critical component of a school’s ability to deliver its mission with excellence. If it is not style, then what are the critical aspects of executive leaders that separate the best leaders from the rest?

Our existing measure of executive leadership comprises ISM’s Stability Marker No. 3. It is a 20-item measure rating your leadership traits and points of emphasis, as perceived by the faculty, that translate into your ability to foster a healthy faculty culture. The measure is commensurate with our model, ISM X. In ISM X, “Executive Leadership” occupies a critical point at which the strategic plan/strategic financial plan, with the school’s resources, is translated into a healthy school culture. Such a culture maximizes student performance, enthusiasm, and satisfaction through the faculty, providing a predictable and supportive environment driven by a common commitment to professional growth and renewal within a professional learning community. These factors in turn produce enrollment demand and are related to the long-term viability of the school.

Our existing research into executive leadership found the following ideas and concepts are essential to producing a strong faculty culture. A strong School Head is:

– **charismatic**: as evidenced by an on-campus public presence that is seen as gracious, respectful, contemplative, self-effacing, and humble, yet at the same time infused with a sense of moral purpose and integrity perceived by all as nonnegotiable and impervious to political pressure;

– **flexible**: willing to engage in “conversation” with others while moving toward a decision and being open to being influenced by that conversation;

– **predictable**: consistently responds to events both, “good” and “bad”;

– **supportive**: discriminately provides support when merited; and,

– **an effective communicator**: gracious, respectful, fluent and articulate in public communication forums, both written and oral.

The goal of leadership is to optimize an organization’s performance. To achieve this for a school, you must attend to the “process” (strategy, goals, and actions) and people (listening, inspiring, changing beliefs, gaining commitment, crafting culture). We have observed that the performance of people is inextricably tied to their well-being and that of their leaders. Thus, we wondered if the School Head’s well-being should be added to this list of essential characteristics that drive outcomes in private schools. Studies in the public sector on the impact and importance of the School Principal support this notion.

- In 2007, the National Staff Development Council identified the three strands of school leadership as including academic focus, shared beliefs/values, and productive professional relationships. The report highlighted a caring and personal climate, trust, as well as honest and open communications.

- In 2009, a Wallace Foundation report indicated that, after teacher quality, school leadership was the second most important influence on student learning.

- In 2008, Calder Urban Institute published *Estimating Principal Effectiveness*, which suggested that principals who stayed in a school longer were more effective; yet, in 2014, the National Center for Education Statistics reported in *Principal Attrition and Mobility* (including private schools) that 20% of private-independent School Heads turn over each year. Many leave education entirely.

- In 2013, a National Association of Elementary School Principals summary of principal leadership research identified isolation and a workload that seems insurmountable as two of four reasons principals left the position.

**Study Description and Summary Statistics**

In 2016, we invited Heads and their faculties to complete a survey that examined their well-being and the stability of their schools. Stability was defined by the first Tier of Stability Markers, including:

– cash reserves/debt/endowment;

– the existence of a strategic plan/strategic financial plan;

– executive leadership (measured through a faculty questionnaire);

– hard-income coverage;

– faculty culture (measured through a faculty questionnaire);

– enrollment demand in excess of supply.

Well-being was determined by two measures, including the Diener Flourishing Scale and the Diener Subjective Well-being Scale (Life Satisfaction). Participants answered questions about their experience of trust, predictability, and support apparent between the Head and the Board and the Head and his or her direct reports. Given that “being an effective communicator,” particularly in public and group situations, is a key competency noted in our existing measure of executive leadership, a brief measure of social facility
was given to assess School Head's confidence in social and public speaking situations.

Following two rounds (spring and fall) of participation requests:
– 210 School Heads began the set of survey instruments;
– 131 School Heads completed the set of items, with an average length of time in the field of education of 25.06 years;
– 90 Heads reported being in their first headship; and
– the mean length of time in their current position was 7.5 years, while the median length was five years, indicating that a few longer-term Heads skewed the arithmetic mean upward. The set of schools that comprise the 131 participants were not significantly dissimilar to other data sets we have collected, suggesting a representative sample despite the voluntary nature of the data collection.

Because Stability Marker No. 3 (Executive Leadership) and No. 5 (Faculty Culture) are necessarily completed by the schools’ teachers, School Heads emailed a link to their faculties inviting them to complete these confidential measures. While teachers from 89 schools began the survey, 40 schools had both complete School Head data and sufficient faculty response to the measures. There were no significant variations in the summary statistics or the correlation matrix among the School-Head-completed variables in the two sample sets (131 vs. 40).

Results Summary

Multiple regression was the primary method of statistical analysis for this study, and in future I&P articles we will provide deeper analysis of the findings and more specific recommendations. For this introductory article, significant bivariate correlations lead us to conclude, as expected, that executive leadership is significantly related to school performance and culture. Further, the well-being of executive leaders matters, and is significantly related to the leader’s ability to produce a strong faculty culture and key school outcomes. Specifically we found significant correlations among:
• Executive Leadership (Stability Marker No. 3) and
  – Enrollment Demand (r = 0.31);
  – Faculty Culture (r = 0.51); and,
  – Predictability/Support with the Board (r = 0.32).
• Heads Flourishing (Well-being) and
  – School Stability (Sum of Tier 1 Stability Markers) (r = 0.46);
  – Faculty Culture (r = 0.41);
  – Trust (with Board and Direct Reports) (r = 0.52);
  – Predictability/Support with the Board (r = 0.42); and,
  – Current Tenure as Head (r = 0.39).
• Current Tenure and Stability Marker 1 (Debt, Cash Reserves, Endowment Mix) (r = 0.34).

Of note is that, while the length of time in their position was correlated to the financial stability of the school, experience in education and as a Head was not correlated with any other variables including school performance, faculty culture, and the School Head’s well-being. Leadership matters and tenure are related to school stability. Experience, however, appears unrelated to school performance and the well-being of the Head.

As with any correlation, causal direction cannot be determined, but we are equally comfortable asserting that your well-being influences your success, your faculty’s culture, and your school’s performance—including enrollment demand. At the same time, your school’s performance, the support you experience, and the faculty culture influences your well-being. Again while subsequent studies will provide deeper analysis of the data and more specific recommendations, in general, you should not allow the demands of your stressful position as School Head to cause you to cast aside the healthy behaviors that mitigate that stress. Instead, we recommend you make your own social-emotional well-being a top priority. It is a leadership action that will benefit you, the performance of those around you, and the success (including enrollment success) of your school. I&P

3 See “School Head Leadership: Results from ISM’s Follow-up Study,” I&P, 30-10-39.
4 See “Flourishing Scale,” http://ow.ly/tvca30cypp
5 Note that the focus of our study was not on physical well-being, yet we suspect physical well-being is part of a healthy approach to leadership.