School Head Leadership: Results From ISM’s Follow-up Study

In early fall of the 2004-05 school year, ISM conducted a study of School Head leadership to determine those characteristics most closely associated with strong faculty cultures (the criterion variable in the study). That variable – the faculty culture – had been chosen as the study’s anchor in view of two earlier ISM studies.

First, in ISM’s six-year International Model Schools Project in the early and mid-1990s, professional-growth-focused faculty cultures had been found by overwhelming margins to be the strongest determinant of consistent, high-level student performance, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. Second, in a subsequent ISM study, the faculty culture focused on professional growth was ranked – and still ranks today – as the third Stability Marker™ (of the 17 characteristics identified by ISM as those most closely associated with a private-independent school’s ability to sustain excellence, by its own definition, in its student programs).

The findings from the fall 2004-05 School Head leadership study are shown on page 2 – exactly as displayed in an earlier Ideas & Perspectives – in Tables 1 and 2. Titled “16 Characteristics of Head Leadership,” Table 1 displays those eight characteristics labeled “points of emphasis.” These comprise leadership steps or tactics that a School Head might choose to employ and develop over time.

Table 2 displays those eight characteristics labeled “leadership traits.” These describe how a School Head “is,” as distinct from what he or she is “doing.”

ISM’s follow-up study was designed to illuminate the eight items in Table 2, and thereby to clarify the nature of these traits and to suggest more specifically how a given school leader might move in the directions implied by them.

The Follow-up Study: Design and Participants

Six schools participated in the second leadership study. Data were collected during the spring of 2005. As with the fall 2004 study, all schools chosen were sufficiently large and mature that the School Head was not required by the organization’s structure to be the direct manager of the faculty; i.e., in all of the schools in the two leadership studies there was some kind of second-level senior academic administration in place.

As with the earlier study, 12 teachers were selected from each school for ISM interviews. The teachers were chosen at random from among those who had served on the school’s faculty for four years or more. With multi-division schools, representation was balanced (e.g., four teachers from each of three divisions in a PK-12 setting).

Participants were first asked to respond to the 12 items on ISM’s Faculty Culture Profile. Each faculty member then responded to 26 leadership-focused questions, each question concerning the School Head. Eight of the 26 questions were repeated from the first study and comprised those that make up Table 2, the “School Head Leadership Traits.”

The other 18 questions were designed to shed fresh light on the original eight. For example, No. 3 in Table 2, “The School Head displays great flexibility,” was followed in the current study by several questions designed to suggest exactly what “flexibility” might look like, day to day, in School Heads who were rated high (or low) on that item.

When all interviews were completed at the six schools and the data recorded, 26 Pearson Product-Moment correlations were run to determine the statistical significance of the leadership traits in question. To arrange the data for the correlations, each teacher had been given a single score on the Faculty Culture Profile to reflect her/his responses to that portion of the interview, and this score was paired with her/his 26 responses to form the array of data units entered into the calculation. The correlations, in other words, sought to determine the statistical strength of the relationships between the Profile score and each of the 26 leadership questions, with 12 (teachers) x 6 (schools) = 72 entries in the horizontal array (i.e., 72 rows), and 27 entries (Profile score plus 26 questions) in the vertical array (i.e., 27 columns).

Table 3 on page 3 shows the outcome. Of the 26 items, 10 were statistically significant at the .001 level. They are listed in descending order of strength of correlation.

Discussion of Outcomes

In order to focus a discussion that will be consistent with the purpose of this follow-up study, Table 2 – not Table 3 – will be used as the discussion outline. The Table 2 findings will be discussed, in other words, in the context of Table 3’s impact upon our understanding of those eight items.

1. The School Head is respectful of others, regardless of their position in the organization. The item itself, worded this way, did not meet the .001 level statistical cut-off in the follow-up study. Instead, a refinement of the item (shown as No. 5 in Table 3) reached that significance level. The item’s wording is: “The School Head shows respect for others in her/his formal interactions, such as when presiding over meetings.” This refinement is related to findings in both of the ISM leadership studies that “charisma” is translated in private-independent school communities in ways that are simply different from other organizational communities.

In the first study, we noted that charisma seemed so transformed by the other items that it appeared to mean little more than the ability to speak with confidence in public. Similarly, the high-impact application of “being respectful of others” appears to come in formal settings more than informal. Public speaking matters. Graciousness and conspicuous courtesy as an integral component in the Head’s public presence – whether speaking to the parent body, the student body, the faculty/staff, or presiding over meetings of all descriptions – is a paramount leadership characteristic.
2. The School Head is a charismatic person. As with Table 2's top-ranking item, this item itself, worded this way, did not reach significance in the follow-up study, nor did any refinements of “charisma” as a concept. Instead, as with the first study, a number of other items that bear on the concept overwhelmed “charisma” to such an extent that, once again, the concept is modified almost into non-existence (using a conventional definition) as a significant leadership characteristic in private-independent schools.

Table 3 items that bear on the puzzle include these.

- The School Head’s humility enhances her/his leadership (No. 8).
- The School Head is a contemplative person (No. 7).
- The School Head is steeped in moral purpose, moral clarity, moral conviction, and integrity (No. 6).
- The School Head is NOT influenced by “pressure tactics” designed to force her/him to alter course (No. 9, reworded).
- The School Head is NOT influenced by the status of persons attempting to influence her/him to alter course (No. 10, reworded).

Consider this list vis-à-vis the conventional meaning of charisma. A new definition for the term emerges readily: Charisma in the private-independent school headship is associated with an on-campus public presence that is seen as gracious, respectful, contemplative person.
plative, self-effacing, and humble, yet at the same time suffused with a sense of moral purpose and integrity perceived by all as non-negotiable and strongly resistant to political pressure.

3. **The School Head displays great flexibility.** This item not only reached significance in the second study (third-ranked in both Table 2 and Table 3), but two of its refinement items did as well (Table 3, Nos. 9 and 10). As worded in the paragraph above, those two refinement items were “The School Head is NOT influenced by ‘pressure tactics’ designed to force her/him to alter course,” and “The School Head is NOT influenced by the status of persons attempting to influence her/him to alter course.” Flexibility itself is understood to refer to the School Head’s willingness to engage in “conversation” (with faculty, staff, others) while moving toward a decision, and, implicitly then, her/his willingness to be influenced by others, regardless of whether or not the final decision will be pure consensus, purely authoritarian, or something in between.

The two refinements are understood to refer to what happens after the decision has been made, and to suggest that the School Head must be seen as resistant to “tactical” efforts to subvert a process (or in any “covert” fashion to alter the decided-upon vector), and similarly impervious to status-based efforts to accomplish the same (e.g., a faculty member enlisting the support of a Trustee to “put pressure” on the Head to alter a course that has been decided upon).

4. **The School Head is a supportive person.** Remarkably, this item showed the highest correlation of all in the second leadership study, both in its original form and in one of its refinement forms (Table 2, No. 4; and Table 3, Nos. 1 and 2). Reworded, the refinement form of the item states, “The School Head is indeed supportive, but does NOT give positive reinforcement unless it is actually merited.” As with the previous item, these items together place a clear and unique perspective on the idea of supportiveness, suggesting that while supportiveness, a central leadership trait, must be among the School Head’s characteristics, it must not be displayed indiscriminately and must clearly be merited, or the Head’s role as “the great reinforcer” is simply lost.

5. **The School Head is steeped in moral purpose, moral clarity, moral conviction, and integrity.** This item, worded this way, met the statistical cut-off in both studies (Table 2, No. 5; Table 3, No. 6). Please see the discussion in No. 2, above: “The School Head is a charismatic person.”

6. **The School Head is a supremely ethical person.** This item, worded this way, met the statistical cut-off in both studies (Table 2, No. 6; Table 3, No. 4). As in the report of the first study, it is conceptually grouped with the preceding item, “ethics” and “morality” being linked inextricably, both in action and in public perception. Constituencies interpret a School Head’s public (oral and written) references to morality and ethics as evidence that the leader is anchored in higher principles, and that her/his decisions and behaviors will always conform to those principles.

7. **The School Head is predictable:** One can rely on the consistency of her/his responses to events, both “good” and “bad.” This item failed to meet the .001 level of significance in the second study, both in its original form and in its refinement forms.
8. The School Head seems self-righteous. This item—significant in the first study as a negative correlation—was significant in the second study in one of its refinement versions: “The School Head’s humility enhances her/his leadership.” The refinement wording can be seen as a summary of several of the core findings of both leadership studies. The idea here is not simply that humility is one ingredient among many; all of which comprise leadership; rather, the idea is that humility (and all that tends to go with it: unpretentiousness, courtesy, graciousness, respect) is a fundamental building block in School Head leadership, without which the edifice may not stand, or may not stand as tall. (See again the earlier discussion under No. 2: “The School Head is a charismatic person.”)

Summary
The following summary ideas and concepts are offered at the conclusion of the two School Head leadership studies conducted during the 2004–5 school year.

1. “Charisma”—by that name or by another—in the private-independent school headship is associated with an on-campus public presence that is seen as gracious, respectful, contemplative, self-efficacing and humble, yet at the same time suffused with a sense of moral purpose and integrity perceived by all as non-negotiable and impervious to political pressure.

2. Public communication (oral and written)–gracious, respectful, fluent, articulate—matters. And “public speaking” must be seen to refer not only to large-group presentations by the School Head, but to (a) all public engagements (e.g., large-group meetings, small-group meetings); (b) the Head’s column in the newsletter; (c) special-occasion letters to the parent body (e.g., announcing the annual fund drive); and (d) all other oral or written communications to constituents.

3. Flexibility refers to the School Head’s willingness to engage in “conversation” (with faculty, staff, others) while moving toward a decision, and, implicitly then, her/his willingness to be influenced by others, regardless of whether or not the final decision will be pure consensus, purely authoritarian, or something in between.

4. After a decision has been made, the School Head must be seen as resistant to “tactical” efforts to subvert a process (or in any “covert” fashion to alter the decided-upon vector), and similarly impervious to status-based efforts to accomplish the same (e.g., a faculty member enlisting the support of a Trustee to “put pressure” on the Head to alter a course that has been decided upon).

5. Supportiveness as a central leadership trait is essential, but it must never be displayed indiscriminately (to individuals or within a group) and must always be seen clearly as merited.

6. Moral purpose, moral clarity, moral conviction, integrity, and ethical behavior are fundamental to all strong leadership.

7. Perceived humility strengthens leadership.

8. “Management style”—the School Head’s placement on a participatory-to-authoritarian continuum—is irrelevant; any “style” will do equally well, so long as it conforms to the implications of these studies’ findings.

Caveat
As stated in our previous I&P article, the ISM School Head leadership research projects of 2004–05 define the leadership characteristics of Heads in medium-to-large school from the standpoint of the faculty culture’s excellence (or lack thereof). ISM does not make the claim that this is the “correct” set of leadership characteristics for all Heads in all settings.

ISM does, however, make these claims.

• The faculty culture’s characteristics are critical to student performance, enthusiasm, and satisfaction.

• School Head leadership characteristics that correlate most strongly with excellence in the faculty culture should be examined with great care by Heads and Trustee leaders.

• These leadership characteristics should be thoughtfully worked into the Head’s own professional growth and development plans, as needed, and, where deemed appropriate, into the Head’s evaluation framework.


4 The participating schools and their Heads were (1) Canterbury School (FL), Ellen Welsh, Head of School; (2) Davidson Academy (TN), Bill Chaney, Headmaster; (3) King & Low-Heywood Thomas School (CT), Thomas Main, Head of School; (4) San Domenico School (CA), Dr. Mathew Heirsche, Head of School; (5) Seton Hall Preparatory School (NJ), Msgr. Michael Kelly, Headmaster; and (6) St. Mary’s Episcopal School (TN), Marlene Shaw, Head of School. ISM is grateful to each school and to individual Heads for their generosity in allowing the inevitable interruptions caused by on-site interviews of faculty and administration.

5 Download a free copy of the Faculty Culture Profile online at isminc.com/M#mcgendefcp

6 For a detailed discussion of ISM research-consistent leadership (of faculty) behaviors, see “From Entrenched Faculty to Committed Teachers,” I&P, 30-8-32.


8 See “Excellence in Executive Leadership: A School Head Evaluation Instrument (Part One),” I&P, 30-5-19; “Excellence in Executive Leadership: A School Head Evaluation Instrument (Part Two),” 30-6-23; and “The Head Support and Evaluation Committee: What Does Support Actually Mean?” 30-7-28. To order the full Head evaluation instrument, go to isminc.com/M#mpubkXEL