

The Role(s) of the Headmaster

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Given the incredibly complex nature of the job, one could easily question the sanity of anyone who wished to become a headmaster. That being said, I know of few avocations which provide as many opportunities to impact positively the lives of others as do headmasterships. If one truly wishes to mold and shape the lives of young people, be an essential part of the development of the family unit, and serve as a role model for both children and adults, there may be no better position than that of the headmaster.

Perhaps the most important role of the headmaster is that of head master. The headmaster should be a master teacher, and serve as a model for excellence both in and out of the classroom. Additionally, the headmaster should serve as a model for integrity. The head should work in concert with the faculty for the development of individual success and self esteem among the students and the faculty in his school. Additionally, the faculty and the headmaster should be dedicated to encouraging, supporting, and nurturing students in their pursuit of excellence. Teaching is, in my view, one of the noblest professions; and the headmaster is, at the very essence, a teacher first and everything second. This seems wholly appropriate, and is probably the most challenging aspect of the position.

That being said, the headmaster is also the chief executive officer of the independent school. As CEO, the head's most important role is that of personnel director. A school is reflective of its faculty, and any school is only as good as its weakest faculty member. A major responsibility of the head is to attract and retain the best teachers possible. Likewise, he must motivate and challenge teachers who are struggling. Often, he must make the very difficult decision not to renew a faculty member's contract. A head will shape the very nature of the school by his hiring and firing decisions, and while these decisions are often among the most difficult he will face, they also have the greatest potential for long-term reward.

Included in the head's role as chief executive officer, he must also serve as the lead administrator in the school. The head should build an administrative team which operates by consensus and with open discussions on a regular basis. That administrative team should feel comfortable disagreeing, for that is how true consensus is developed. And once a consensus decision has been made, then each member of the administrative team can feel good about representing the eventual outcome as a group decision. This type of core administrative decision-making most often leads to the best decisions, and it should include advice from as many constituencies as possible. There are several constituencies which are influential in every school setting: trustees, parents, administrators, and faculty. In total, these individuals are charged with the responsibility of shaping an educational environment which implements the philosophy of the school. In meeting this objective,

The Role(s) of the Headmaster – Page 2

the welfare of the students must always be foremost in their minds. In short, these group decisions must always be based on what is best for children.

The headmaster also serves as chief marketer for the independent school. In every walk of life, the headmaster represents the institution he serves. Thus, community involvement is both a requirement of the job and an opportunity for greater success on the part of the head. The headmaster must realize that this is a critical part of his job responsibilities, and he should endeavor to take this aspect of school keeping seriously. Solid friendships, active involvement outside the school community, and effective modeling are all critical parts of the job description.

These days, it almost goes without saying that the headmaster is also the school's chief fundraiser. Only a handful of independent schools are financially secure. The vast majority seek funding in addition to tuition revenue in order to make the necessary strides and improvements required for continued growth and development. He not only must be able to articulate the school's vision, but he must be willing to ask for money and able to link people's dreams and visions with their philanthropic abilities. No school can be successful without the headmaster taking this critical role. Likewise, no headmaster can be successful without understanding this simple fact. In independent schools, fundraising is here to stay. Those schools which are able to best articulate this need will not only survive but thrive.

There is an interesting paradox in schools, which bears some illumination. The headmaster serves as both the school's leader and its employee. The head, by definition, is the board's only employee. If there are significant problems at the school, it is often a result of poor administration on the part of the head. As such, the board must make the critical decisions to hire and fire its headmaster. But importantly, it must rely upon the headmaster to run the school. The headmaster is responsible for recruiting and retaining the school's faculty and staff, and the board should support that model. With extensive consultation from the board, the head must run effectively the school's total operations.

The headmaster also is the school's visionary. In this role, the headmaster must articulate the school's mission, not necessarily the head's view of that mission but rather the school's accepted philosophy. As visionary, the head can set the course for future directions by asking questions and, in the spirit of consensus decision-making, prodding for potential changes. Through dynamic leadership, the head creates a standard for all employees as well as the full "community of learners." It is through skilled negotiation, genuine caring for others, and visionary leadership that the head shapes the school community in this very important manner.

Finally, the headmaster is the head learner in the school. In over 20 years as a classroom teacher, with four years of graduate school, three years of college, and 13 years of elementary and secondary education prior to that, I have learned more from my students than any other source. It is through these fine young men and women that I continue to learn how to best teach, gain insight into the "bigger picture," and, indeed, gain insight into how to best get along with people. In this way, I have learned much from the parents

The Role(s) of the Headmaster – Page 3

of those students, the trustees of those institutions, and the alumni, grandparents and friends who have been so interested in the continuing development of the schools which I have served. Sharing an insatiable desire to continue in the learning process is, perhaps, as critical as anything the head can do. As the head “learner,” the headmaster (like the teacher) looks beyond his subject matter. In my view, teachers must strive to see the world through the eyes of their students. Only then can they begin to appreciate their influence on the lives of others. Once learned, this is an important concept to continually share with those who make up the school’s “community of learners.”

The roles delineated above represent a necessarily varied and complex job description. And anyone can make mistakes. Thus, the head must also exhibit humility, honesty, and a willingness to learn from his mistakes while attempting to fulfill these job expectations. He should take his job, but not himself, seriously. If one truly loves teaching youngsters, an aspiration to this position seems natural but daunting. It is this dichotomous challenge which makes this position so fulfilling. Yes, one may question the sanity of anyone who is interested in such a position. However, there can be no question about how this individual can influence the lives of generations to come by his vigilance, dedication, attitude, and presence. What more could anyone ask from a job?