

COACHING & INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HEADSHIP:

WELCOME TO THE WILD WEST

I. Introduction

At our annual advisory group breakfast in Long Beach in February 2019, John Gulla announced the creation of a “flexible agenda” at E.E. Ford, to focus on a prioritized issue of special importance to independent schools. The conversation turned quickly to the topic of school leadership, the median head tenure of under seven years and the educational, cultural and financial strain on schools in frequent transition. Head searches and board governance were mentioned, but the insufficient number of qualified consultants to support new heads drew particular attention.

While many heads have benefitted from a strong Board Chair/Head relationship in the early years and have appreciated Transition Team Welcome Wagons of food, wine, and shopping tips, there has been no systematic effort to make a professional consultant to the Head as common in a contract as moving expenses. Is coaching the essential missing piece in the strategy to produce successful head transitions and flourishing tenures known for ROI: “Ripples of Influence”?

After interviews with over 50 sitting or retired heads, another ten conversations with coaches, consultants, trustees, organization heads, and additional research, I have concluded that a systematic enhancement of coaching for newer heads can be a key support during leadership transitions.

II. Coaching, Mentoring and Therapy

One lucky head of a famously well-endowed school told me that she had a mentor, a coach and a therapist! Assuming that she still had time to run a school, she was optimally supported and she had a keen understanding of what she could expect from each of her consultants. Her mentor was a long-term friend and colleague, a former head who knew the job and knew her extremely well. He was at the top of her speed dial for informal advice. Theirs was an open-ended multi-year relationship of absolute trust. Her therapist was a clinician trained in psychology, to whom she could share hopes, fears, and intimate details of her history. Her executive coach was someone she had never met prior to her appointment, contractually retained by the school, to help her advance professionally to mutually developed goals.

Once I arranged for a colleague new to her job to meet separately with a coach and our school therapist. In one meeting with her coach, a kind but no-nonsense practitioner, my colleague dwelled on her childhood experiences until the coach finally said: “That’s for the therapist. I focus on your behavior in the workplace.” The coach was telling her client what she

should...and should not...expect from their time together. She was reminding her to focus on concrete professional outcomes.

A mentor is often that experienced figure of wisdom and affection who has great answers for you. A coach asks great questions, facilitating supportively but more formally a conversation around clear goals, for a specific period of time. A coach's contract often details the frequency of meetings and the process of the coaching plan. Sometimes it includes feedback from others, such as the Board Chair or direct reports. The coach is either paid an hourly fee or is retained for a specified time period. Many heads have benefitted from a trusted mentor, if they are fortunate enough to find one informally. All new heads can benefit from a coach who operates more proactively and strategically, for a specified purpose, with a clear end game in mind.

III. A Brief History of Coaching

The word *coach* may have appeared first at Oxford around 1830 to describe a tutor hired specifically to provide extra help to scholars who had tarried overlong on the rugby field or at their drinking club. It was then applied to athletes about a decade later. Throughout many decades in Twentieth Century America, Great Books Co-founder Mortimer Adler employed the term coaching to the role of a seminar facilitator using Socratic method. I was first certified in this methodology by the Great Books Foundation in 1986 and have applied them to classes each year since to

- Clarify concepts
- Probe assumptions
- Probe rationale and evidence
- Question viewpoints
- Probe implications and consequences throughout
- Identify, as Aristotle insisted, the "archer's mark": the clear target to be hit.

Today, Paideia Schools throughout America feature this technique as a primary pedagogy.

Harry Levinson, "the father of executive coaching," began his tenure at the Harvard Business School in 1968. According to the *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Wild West of Executive Coaching" (2004), the field was developed in the 1970's as an effort to begin "the re-humanization of executives" who increasingly needed a "subtle set of competencies," including communication, relationship skills, adaptability to change, and respect for diverse backgrounds. At the same time at U.S.C., Warren Bennis was beginning his longitudinal studies on leadership which discovered that heads of an organization often required human skills which Daniel Goleman would call emotional intelligence, as well as technical ones, to achieve institutional aims.

While the profile of a new leader was emerging, the profile of the coach remained ambiguous. The "Wild West" article asserted: "No one has yet demonstrated conclusively what makes an

executive coach qualified or what makes one approach to executive coaching better than another.”

Since 2004, disagreement over the best coaching profile may have magnified. Must the person be formally certified from a coaching program? Should that program be affiliated with a university, or itself accredited by a governing body? How strong must formal training in psychology be and which school of psychology? Psychoanalysis? Cognitive behavioral? Humanistic? Is one’s coaching experience the vital determinant? Or is experience in the client’s field – for example, a former head of school - - a crucial prerequisite? Does knowledge of the specific organization’s culture matter? Finally, who is the client and who is the coaching meant to serve? Executive coaching programs differ considerably on philosophy and pedagogy. Columbia or Berkeley might consider the executive the client, and the executive’s personal growth the key goal. Others, like much of the work at Stanford, might regard the organization the client, and emphasize more contact with the Board Chair, direct reports, and even 360-degree feedback. In that model, the coach would help to align institutional and executive values and goals.

Julie Wilson, longtime coach and author of [The Human Side of Changing Education](#), brings needed perspective to coaching’s ideological wars: “Multiple models of coaching work, depending on the circumstances.” In other words, a specific context may call for a particular coaching approach. And our broad context is the independent school, our narrower context a particular school, with a specific head.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HEADSHIP

Monique DeVane of College Prep regards headship as “context-based leadership.” While she believes that there is much to learn from *Harvard Business Review*, she reminds us that independent schools are idiosyncratic places, requiring a specific understanding of unique constituencies. Many agree with Monique. Teachers, according to psychologist Rob Evans, form a “secular priesthood,” and are not primarily entrepreneurial nor material. Parents, according to “Jobs to Be Done” author Bob Moestra, assess value according to their child’s progress, but differ on their interpretation of progress. Students balance between internal growth and happiness and external accomplishments. This mission-driven context differs from many business market-driven contexts and requires unique leadership. Cathy Shelbourne of CAIS asks: “What do heads need?”

During my recent fifty plus conversations with heads, answers differ according to specific school circumstances and according to the tenure of a particular head, but all agree that new leaders must learn the unique features of school leadership. The job is distinctive among other CEO positions and, most importantly, is fundamentally different from any other job in the school. The headship is different from other positions not in degree, but in kind.

The CAIS Strategic Plan states: “Prior training seldom prepares a new head for the full scope of issues.” Michael Watkins, author of The First 90 Days, notes: “Transitions fail because new leaders misunderstand essential demands or lack the skill or flexibility to adapt to them. One head noted: “It’s a monumental leap.”

When I asked dozens of first-time heads about the major adjustments to the position, they overwhelmingly discussed the following themes:

Depth of Responsibility

- “The Buck Stops Here.”
- “There is something enormous about being responsible for all decisions...you’re it.”
- “I had a very important position in a very distinguished school, but now I realize that supporting the head is not the same as being out in front.”
- “I was used to sitting at the leadership table looking at the head. Now everybody is looking to me for answers. You know this intellectually, but you aren’t prepared for it emotionally.”
- “I have had to become a systems thinker,” referring to the insight that one aspect of school life inevitably and often unintentionally impacts another. Peter Senge, author of The 5th Discipline, warns that “we do not understand our level of interdependence.” The school head must lead us to appreciate this interconnectedness across people, program, and resources.

These quotes typify the jarring response to assuming the onus of responsibility.

Breadth of Responsibility

- “I was shocked by the incredible scope of the job. All day I move from discussions about kindergarten bathroom protocol to campus master planning and back.”
- “Working with a Board was a whole new game.”
- “Everyone from all constituencies wants my ear.”
- “I was completely unprepared for the fundraising, working with lawyers, dealing with public officials, while remembering the child-centered mission.”
- “If you’re an assistant head, you still spend 80% of your time on operations, which is a place where perfectionists can thrive. The ratio has to reverse when you are head.”

Resource 175 Consultant and long-term head Doreen Oleson puts it:

- “The more I work with heads, I realize that versatility is key to success. And not just the ability to address broad issues, but true adaptability to move across leadership styles according to circumstances.”

Doreen’s point is akin to Monique DeVane’s vision of “heads moving nimbly across contexts.” An aid in applying this concept is the Leadership Versatility Index 360, which has been called “one tool to help leaders build their repertoire of behaviors.” It is a potentially significant coaching instrument to help enhance head performance based upon extensive feedback from multiple constituencies. It assumes that both head and coach must understand constituency perceptions in order to develop appropriately flexible leadership.

Two long term heads revealed their secrets to success:

- “I’ve become more comfortable with ambiguity and imperfection.”
- “I still love the messiness of it.”

Nature of Responsibility

In addition to obvious technical and quantitatively measurable responsibilities, the head is the moral, cultural, and symbolic leader of the school.

- “Most vitally, school culture needs to be learned.”
- “What builds trust? What destroys trust?”
- “They’re not looking to you for information. They can find that on the website. They’re trying to decide if they can trust their child to you.”

In his short story, “An Evening with Marianne Constant,” the psychiatrist Ned Hallowell portrays the retirement party of a head as seen through the eyes of various guests: adoring student, bitter rival, loving but faintly patronizing Board Chair. All are transferring their own issues onto the head, who, the reader understands, is a symbolic figure reflecting the hopes and fears of various constituents.

As Harry Levinson realized at Harvard in 1968 when he developed initial ideas on executive coaching, emotional intelligence lies at the core of successful leadership, and the head who listens, asks questions, builds relationships, trusts intuition, tells a compelling story of the school that aligns with people’s dreams, will persuade a community to follow a vision. Nurturing these sensibilities, above and beyond the technical responsibilities of headship, is the essential work of a coach. The coach can help the head to develop the specific skills and knowledge that will weave together technical and human features into leadership.

COACHING IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

As a head, I have worked with two different executive coaches, one beginning in my first years of headship, the second after I had served for twenty years. The coach during my later tenure has been my thought partner. She has not had to guide me through the nature of headship or the culture of the school. She is an elegant discussion facilitator, asking pointed but respectful questions that encourage my self-reflection during the mature phase of my tenure, in order to produce tangible, clearly defined, and measurable improvements for the school. While I have on occasion asked her to seek feedback on me from administrative colleagues, that was my option, not a condition of her contract, which she and I designed collaboratively. I, not the school, have been her client.

In my earliest years, I required a fundamentally different kind of coaching. A successful internal candidate, I knew the school, but knew nothing of headship. I needed someone with a deep background in issues of emotional intelligence as I adjusted years old relationships with colleagues, parents and students. The technical issues were relatively straightforward, but the personal, cultural, and symbolic dynamics required that I receive regular feedback from administrators and faculty, which he often facilitated. He also made sure that my goals were aligned with the school's.

Julie Wilson is right: different coaching styles and philosophies work in different circumstances. Experienced heads of longer tenure need one type of coaching. Experienced heads in a new school need to focus on the unique features of that school. Internal appointments need to focus on headship, and new heads in new schools may require coaching that provides regular feedback from the Board Chair and one's direct reports. Feedback creates context for the head and for the coach. One coach I interviewed insists on having access to three former colleagues in the prior school: "For example, if someone was a poor listener in their other school, they will need deep coaching on listening immediately. I don't want to be entirely dependent on the new head's view of herself." This coach is a former head in California, familiar with the area and the specific school. He has deep context and emphasizes outcomes.

Does a successful coach need to be a retired head, experienced and certified in coaching, familiar with the school and region? Some heads wanted the coach to confine herself to questions, while others wanted to be told if they were heading toward a serious mistake. Some wanted 360-degree feedback; others preferred that the coach speak only to them. The individual match with both the needs of the head and the needs of the school was key.

All agreed that the coach/head relationship was paramount. As one coach remarked, "It is all about fit." All agreed that the head had to be an open and willing participant. All agreed that a successful coach was a deft and searching framer of questions that led to self-reflection and increased self-awareness in order to achieve clearly articulated results.

Heads also report universally that they benefitted from conversations with one another.

COHORTS

After several years of working individually with my first coach, he invited me to help create a discussion group of nonprofit CEOs who shared a mission-driven priority but came from a variety of fields. Each month for almost twenty years, we gathered to hear one another's case studies, in conversations facilitated by our mutual coach. Topics were completely confidential, feedback kind but candid. Always our coach's questions emphasized less the technical issues and more the emotional ones, cannily pushing us to self-reflect on the motives behind our decisions.

To a person, each head I interviewed stressed the benefits of interacting with peers, whether through NAIS New Heads Institute, state or regional gatherings, or informal meetings with nearby colleagues. Whether facilitated or not, these peer interactions were both conceptually and emotionally supportive. Most of these encounters were infrequent and incidental, with no regular and systematic follow-up. All relished the idea of greater contact with peers.

COST

If coaching with cohort support is to become pervasive, the issue of affordability must be addressed. Endowed schools with selective admissions can easily pay coaching costs, but underfinanced schools, whose heads most need such professional development, find \$250 - \$400 an hour and \$10,000 - \$15,000 a year a budget breaker. For those schools, some combination of coaching fee mitigation, school commitment, philanthropic and association support is vital.

EDWARD E. FORD INITIATIVE

Convinced that any meaningful program would combine the three C's – coaching, cohort, and cost – I worked with John Gulla and a cross-section of consulting heads to design a proposal to advance E.E. Ford's "flexible agenda" focus on school leadership. In February 2020, Flintridge Preparatory School received a grant to develop a two year pilot program across California addressing the three legs of the coaching stool – coaching, cohort, and cost. The first year was devoted to research and development, and by June 2021, we launched our pilot with eight coaches and eight heads from various parts of California.

Seven of our eight heads come directly from independent schools, the eighth from a public school. All have focused most of their careers on teaching and learning. Six come from other California schools; two were internal appointments. Five are women, three men. Five are first year heads, one second, and two heads with several years. Their schools represent geographic diversity, ranging from Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area, to the coast and Central Valley, with varying demographic, political, and cultural profiles.

Our coaches include six retired heads, one sitting head, and one executive coach who is a consultant, parent, and trustee to independent schools. These eight coaches vary in approach on two central issues: first, how much context do you seek for the coaching conversation? One coach routinely interviews the Board Chair, the departing head, and three former colleagues of the new head, and likes to interview direct reports midyear, while another will speak with nobody without the head present. Secondly, when, if ever, will the coach set aside Socratic questioning to give specific advice? Some give mentoring advice directly and freely, while others give none, or wait until an unusually critical moment, asking permission with “do you mind if I make a suggestion?” It is akin to the seminar teacher who facilitates lightly for 50 minutes but worries that a crucial point has been ignored during discussion. “Do I let the point pass, or do I take over for the last ten minutes?” Content sometimes supersedes method, particularly if the content for a head is “call your attorney this minute!”

2021-2 PILOT

During the first six months of our pilot, our interactions have included one-on-one coaching, coach/head cohort meetings, heads only and coaches only zoom conversation, and my own one-on-one visits with each head and coach. Specific themes have emerged. In our first cohort meeting, newer heads were interested in practical school issues such as enrollment, budget, and fundraising, while coaches’ comments focused on the skills: relationships, emotional intelligence, cultural leadership. As retired head/coach Roger Weaver notes: “There is an absolute need to honor culture and cultural heritage. A head can lose a job over the Halloween Parade.” Former California Association of Independent Schools Executive Director Jim McManus fused these topics: “The head must at once define reality and give hope.” Throughout the fall, issues of headship and of coaching developed finer color.

HEADS’ ISSUES

As I spoke with each head and coach, one issue above all others was most frequently raised: How does a newer head work with the Board of Trustees? Specifically, goal setting and the head’s evaluation process, the head-Board Chair relationship, governance/administrative distinctions, and the head’s role in selecting future trustees. The majority of coaches were surprised with their own interaction with Board Chairs which was greater than anticipated and

emerged recommending that trustees need more coaching themselves. Some suggestions included:

- More comprehensive orientation in school governance
- Regular review of the Association Accreditation document and its expectation of Boards
- Regular review of Board bylaws
- Robust Board and individual trustee evaluation process
- Frequent review of the head's goals and expectations
- A strategic review of school priorities when selecting new trustees

Another major theme was relationships with individuals, multiple constituencies, and the leadership team. It was second nature for heads to meet with faculty, students, and parents, but alumni, donors, medical experts, financial advisors, and attorneys were often new experiences, reminding heads of the breadth of responsibility. Addressing these priorities required strict management of one's calendar, as unforeseen shifts in the Covid pandemic forced heads to postpone proactive planning to react to the next crisis. By the second semester, the topic of shifting from "defense to offense" emerged, as consultant Al Adams reminded everyone: "you were hired first and foremost to think."

A third theme was remaining mission driven amidst constant decision-making while facing the loneliness of realizing that the buck does stop with the head. However collaborative teams could be, the responsibility finally falls on the leader.

Throughout this challenging period, the heads have been re-affirmed by hearing similar stories from other cohort heads and coaches while gaining fresh ideas and practical solutions.

COACHES' ISSUES

The head's priorities were of course the coach's chief concern, often requiring flexibility in method. A 2019 article in *Harvard Business Review* by Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular on "Leader as Coach" suggests that the practical "sweet spot" in coaching is a dynamic balancing act between "non-directive" asking and "directive" telling, depending on the circumstances. This "situational coaching" blends the artful questioning of coach with the wisdom of the mentor. Throughout the fall, our coaches have imaginatively responded to their head's specific needs, most often in one-to-one conversation, but sometimes including the Board Chair or members of the leadership team, all with the head's full cooperation. And all have benefited by sharing their insights with other cohort coaches.

CONCLUSIONS

E.E. Ford's flexible agenda topic of school leadership is vital and all encompassing. Initiatives in data studies, head of school searches, long term support for emerging leaders, and enhanced governance are all part of strengthening school leadership. But the easiest and most immediate improvement is the comprehensive commitment to coaching in all schools. As Roger Weaver observes: "A new head should be able to assume that there will be a coach."

Some coaching conversations have emphasized the varieties – or numerators – among coaching methods, but perhaps we should focus on the denominators: all coaching at its heart is a creative, collaborative, respectful relationship between coach and coached. As Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular note, good coaching is contagious, and the head who is coached often evolves into the coach of others: the Board, the leadership team, the faculty, and the students, and ultimately, the entire community. The coaching of heads empowers the head, who ultimately empowers the school culture as the head models twenty-first century leadership in emotional intelligence. Because that emotional intelligence lies at the heart of all great teaching and learning, every board in America should support this opportunity for every head.

Ibarra and Scoular note: "Coaching is becoming integral to the fabric of a learning culture." If market-driven companies use coaching to develop learning cultures, shouldn't mission-driven schools? After all, learning is our business.