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Preparing for Headship: Advice from the Front Lines

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Are you ready to be a Head of School? How can you tell?

To gain some insight into the issue of professional development for aspiring school leaders, Wickenden Associates surveyed 190 Heads of independent schools in 1991. We asked which skills they considered essential for successful headship, how a prospective Head might develop those skills, what qualities they would look for if they were hiring a Head of School, and what advice they might offer to aspiring Heads.

DON'T TRY TO GET THERE TOO SOON –
THERE ARE MANY MORE HEADS OVER
50 YEARS OLD LOOKING FOR
SOMETHING ELSE TO DO THAN LONG-
TERM ONES HAPPY THEY BECAME
HEADS AT
30 OR 35.

THIS IS A “CALLING” AND NOT
EVERYONE HAS IT. NOT TO HAVE THE
“CALLING” IS NO FAILURE. THE GIFT IS
TO RECOGNIZE IT AND RESPOND TO IT
IF IT IS THERE.

An astonishing 66 percent of those Heads returned the surveys; many enclosed thoughtful letters as well. Their responses speak volumes about the intricacies of school leadership and constitute both a warning and a plan of action for prospective Heads.

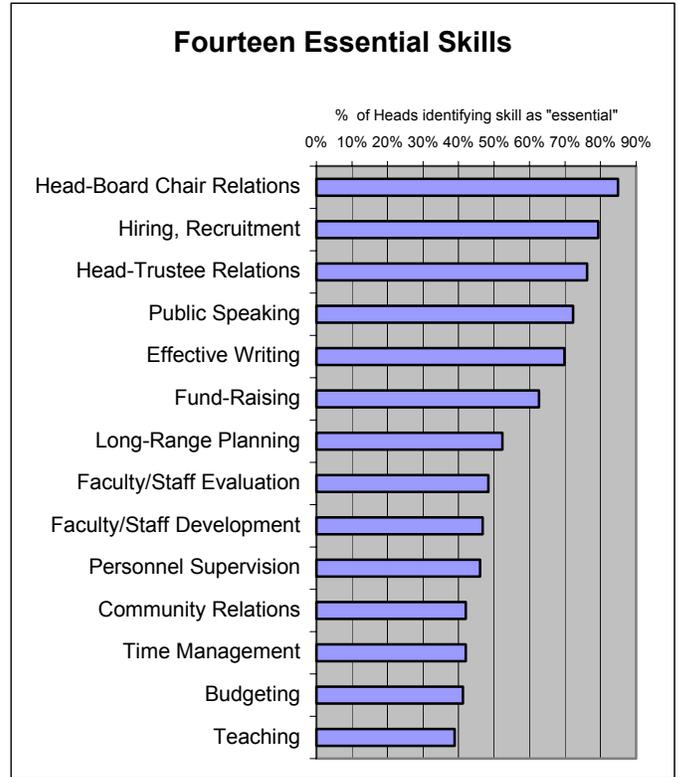
The warning? Headship is not for the faint-hearted. Nor is it for the impatient, the inarticulate, the inflexible, the less than energetic, the shy, or the overly sensitive. Headship, they told us, is awash in ambiguity. It is long on accountability, short on autonomy. It is a balancing act extraordinaire – juggling the competing and conflicting demands of half a dozen constituencies, always with an eye to the “big picture.” Make sure this is really what you want, these Heads advised, and don't rush into it.

If you believe you are temperamentally suited to what one Head called “the crush, the rush, the relentless visibility” of headship, then you are ready to turn your attention to developing the necessary skills.

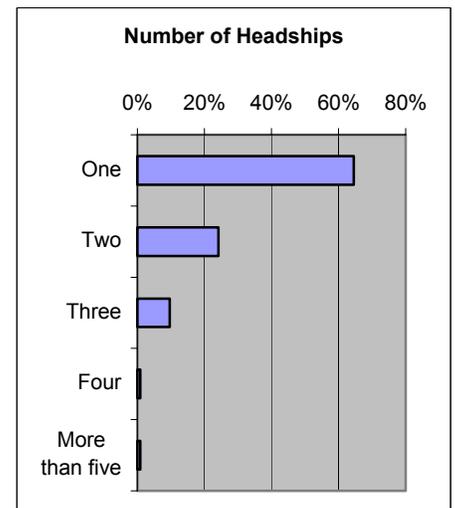
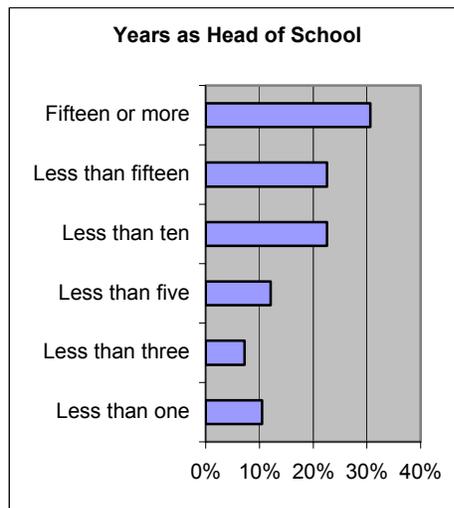
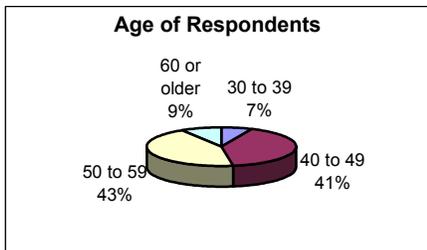
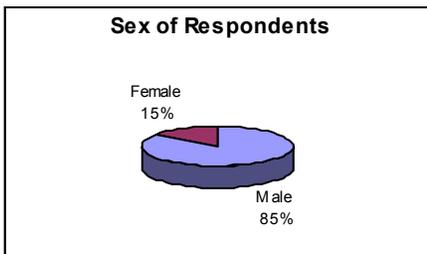
The Essential Skills

From a list of 32 areas of expertise, these Heads identified 14 as “essential to successful headship.” In order of frequency of mention, those areas are: Head-Board Chair relations, hiring and recruitment, Head-trustee relations, public speaking, effective writing, fund-raising, long-range planning, faculty and staff evaluation, faculty and staff development, personnel supervision, community relations, time management, budget, and teaching.

A daunting list to be sure, but Heads also provided assurance that there are many ways to learn these skills.

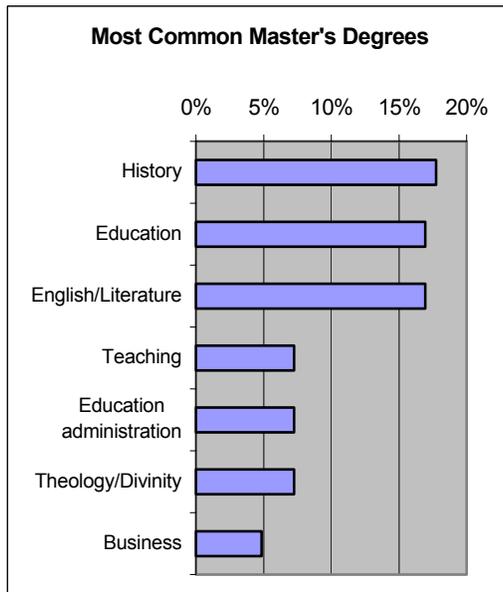


Characteristics of Respondents

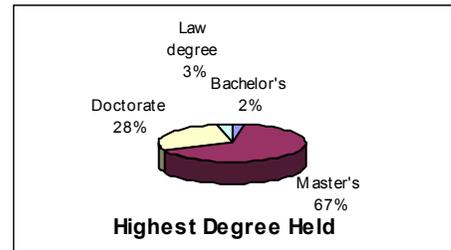


Education

Nearly all of the Heads who returned our survey hold at least a master's degree; several hold more than one. Twenty-eight percent had earned doctoral degrees. The range of subject areas was broad, and while a few Heads advocated acquiring an MBA and some urged specialization in one academic area, the school leaders did



not particularly stress formal education as a means to acquiring expertise.



Perhaps the most important insight they offered in this area applies to timing: If you plan to pursue an advanced degree, do it *before* you accept your first headship. Only four of the 126 responding Heads are currently working toward a degree. The demands of school leadership clearly do not leave much time for graduate work.

Continuing education programs are another matter. Workshops and seminars topped the list of recommended ways to achieve expertise in several specific areas, including fund accounting, fund-raising, staff development and evaluation, long-range planning, time management, and school law. Despite their enthusiastic support for continuing education, though, Heads reminded us that there is no substitute for learning by doing.

Best Approaches to Developing Needed Expertise

For each of the 32 essential skills included in our survey, we asked Heads to tell us the best method for developing expertise in that area. The approaches they recommended are listed in order of frequency of mention. Each essential skill is listed under the approach **most often** recommended by respondents for developing that skill.

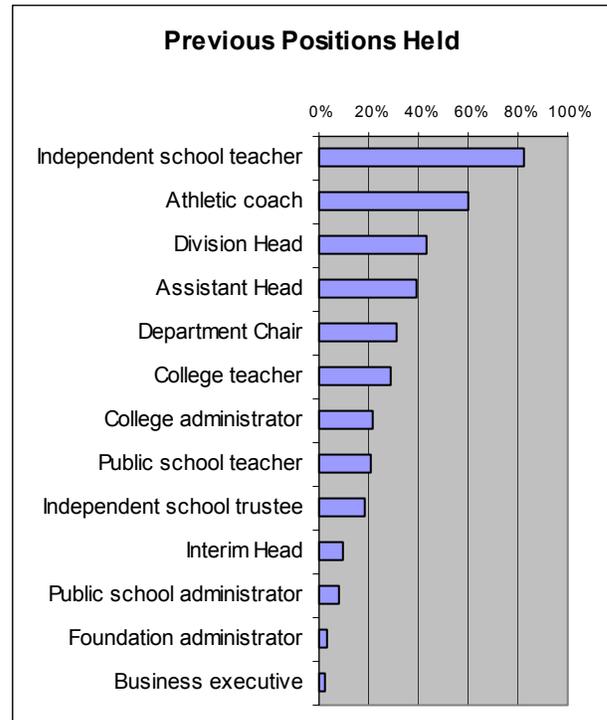
Attend Workshops, Seminars, etc.	Fund accounting Fund-raising Faculty/staff evaluation Personnel supervision Curriculum management Psychological counseling Organizational development	Long-range planning Effective writing Faculty/staff development Teaching Learning styles School law Time management
Rely on Faculty and Staff	Budgeting Financial aid Plant maintenance College counseling Computer applications	Business affairs Marketing, admissions Student support services Athletics, coaching
Independent Reading and Research	Knowledge of educational research	
Seek Advice of Fellow Heads	Head-Board Chair relations Head-trustee relations	Hiring/recruitment
Work with a Mentor	Public speaking	
Turn to Board for Help	Endowment management Construction management	Finance Community relations

Working Your Way Up

In this regard, our respondents had practiced what they preached. Before becoming Heads of School, these 126 leaders had collectively held more than 500 positions in or related to schools. In addition to advocating sheer variety of experience as good preparation for headship, Heads advised aspiring school leaders to place themselves in a few very specific situations:

- Run a summer school or some other comparable major institutional program that involves *many* constituencies.
- Have your Head help you work closely with trustees in areas of finance, buildings and grounds, and development.
- Ask for opportunities to sit at Board meetings and subcommittee meetings, especially on long-range planning, finance, admissions, marketing, financial aid, etc.
- Find a way to play a role in support of a Head at Board meetings, in personnel matters, and in fund-raising.

Critical to the success of this strategy, of course, is the existence of a supportive supervisor, not just an effective Head but “a Head who shares” and who supports your aspirations.



YOU CAN NEVER BE PREPARED FOR EVERYTHING, BUT THE MORE YOU HAVE SEEN, THE MORE DIFFERENT KINDS OF

WORK YOU HAVE DONE – TEACHING, COACHING, ADVISING, WORKING WITH PARENTS, ADMISSIONS, COLLEGE COUNSELING, FUND-RAISING, BUDGETING, DISCIPLINING, HIRING, FIRING, EVALUATING, COMPUTING, SPEAKING, MANAGING – THE BETTER OFF YOU WILL BE.

LEARN TO TEACH AND ADMINISTER FROM THE BEST OF MODELS IN THE BEST OF SCHOOLS. GIVE UP INCOME, IF NECESSARY, TO INTERN IN A LEADING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL.

Mentoring

“Find yourself a mentor” was the number one piece of advice in our survey. For it is through example that you are most likely to learn the truly important aspects of headship: leadership and management, effective communication, and interpersonal skills. Largely unspoken but clearly implied in their comments was the notion that to be your best you must work for the best. For an aspiring Head, then, looking for a job really means shopping for a mentor. Judicious career choices become all-important.

THEY MUST BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD AND TO BE AT RISK. THEY MUST HAVE BEEN ACCOUNTABLE TO PARENTS, STUDENTS, AND FACULTY WITHOUT THE HEAD PROTECTING THEM OR INTERFERING.

I WOULD TELL THE ASPIRING CANDIDATE TO FIND A GOOD HEAD AND GO TO WORK FOR HIM AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. I WOULD SPEAK TO THE HEAD AND INDICATE TO HIM THAT I WAS INTERESTED IN LEARNING EVERYTHING I COULD ABOUT HEADSHIP AND WOULD HE BE WILLING TO SPEND TIME WITH ME TEACHING ME ABOUT THE HEADSHIP. I WOULD ALSO WANT TO SPEND TIME WITH HIM AND HAVE HIM TELL ME WHY HE MADE SPECIFIC DECISIONS AND HOW THOSE SPECIFIC DECISIONS ARE PART OF A LARGER PUZZLE.

HELP YOUR HEAD KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO LEARN AND HOPE HE/SHE WILL BE INTERESTED. IF NOT, GO TO ANOTHER SCHOOL.

IF ALREADY WORKING IN A GOOD SCHOOL, TAKE ON A RANGE OF TASKS, PROJECTS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES, WHETHER YOU HAVE “OFFICE” OR NOT (OFTEN NOT TO HAVE A MENIAL, LOW-LEVEL OFFICE IS ACTUALLY MORE PRODUCTIVE BECAUSE YOU ARE FREER TO CHOOSE, FREER TO MAKE YOUR EFFORTS REALLY COUNT, FREER TO PICK THE CURVE OF GREATER LEARNING AND FULLER GROWTH). IF AN EXEMPLARY SCHOOL LEADER HAPPENS TO BE ON THE PREMISES, WATCH AND ANALYZE, MODEL AND EMULATE.

Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Three of the survey questions invited Heads to write brief responses. The results have been organized here into general patterns. For each question, the top 10 responses are listed in order of frequency of mention, followed by one or more excerpts from their responses.

1. If you could hire the next Head of the school at which you are now employed, which *three or four essential skills or types of experience* would you look for?

Top 10 Responses

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Interpersonal skills | 6. Teaching ability |
| 2. Communication skills | 7. Fund-raising skills |
| 3. Leadership skills | 8. Administrative abilities |
| 4. Ability to articulate a vision | 9. Hiring, supervisory, evaluative skills |
| 5. Business skills | 10. Ability to create change |

By far the most important, in my view, is extensive and varied teaching experience; moreover, if possible, the person should have been notably successful at teaching (not seeking administrative work because of being ineffective or disgruntled as a teacher), and should love the work, and proceed with it even as Head.

While I don't think a successful Head need be a scholar, in the narrow sense, he or she should certainly recognize quality learning and teaching, know the difference between profound and exacting discourse and meretricious jargon, and have mastered an academic discipline well enough to have credibility with parents and students alike.

Whatever the prior experience, a Head needs to be unusually articulate and persuasive, in a variety of forums and at different levels of complexity or detail. One route is teaching, of course; some administrative jobs (such as college admissions and faculty dean) mandate effective practice at speaking and writing, often extempore.

Most important, after teaching, is an instinct, willingness, practice, and success at being a dynamic leader: positions requiring strong decision-making, teamwork, visionary dreaming, and planning.

2. In your view, in what important aspects of headship are prospective Heads *least likely to be adequately prepared*?

Top 10 Responses

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Business affairs, finance | 6. Personnel issues |
| 2. Board relations | 7. Management, delegation |
| 3. Fund-raising | 8. Long-range planning |
| 4. Demands of leadership | 9. Marketing |
| 5. Time management | 10. Parent, community relations |

In my experience, few prospective Heads have had to be boss. They usually come from strong collegial traditions, which I value and favor. Nevertheless, at some point there needs to be someone in charge willing to make tough decisions, defend those openly and forcefully, even listen to moderating voices, but then make a decision and move on. We've become overly process-oriented in our efforts at involving many in running our schools – at least this one.

3. To prepare for successful headship, what *advice* would you give to prospective Heads?

Top 10 Responses

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Find a mentor | 6. Don't rush into it |
| 2. Do a variety of jobs within school | 7. Read |
| 3. Take courses, workshops | 8. Work at more than one school |
| 4. Work on your teaching | 9. Work with, serve on Boards |
| 5. Talk with Heads, visit schools | 10. Learn to delegate |

Work hard on personal self-improvement, becoming a skilled thinker, writer, speaker, analyzer of problems. Become broadly well informed, read constantly. Work at being sensitive to people. Gain a variety of experiences in all kinds of situations. Keep in shape physically. Be expert in at least one teaching field.

Be patient in gaining experience and getting the feel of success before tackling a headmastership. Take appropriate courses to gain technical knowledge in finance, planning, fund-raising, personnel and other important areas of management. Important to have at least a master's degree but OK in subject field as much as education. Actively seek advice, mentoring. Seek opportunities to learn in seminars, by volunteering, etc. Be constantly active.

Don't bury yourself totally in one school for too long; get to know other schools, "ways of skinning a cat."



FINALLY, TO CARE DEEPLY
ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL AND
NOT GIVE A DAMN ABOUT
YOUR JOB. STAY
ATTACHED TO YOUR
FAMILY, YOUR FRIENDS,
AND YOUR VALUES, AND
DON'T LET THE SCHOOL
SUCK YOU DRY.
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
ARE LIKE VAMPIRES,
FASCINATING BUT
DEADLY.

The Need for Balance

The demands of headship seem to present a paradox for many of the Heads who responded to our survey. Prepare to be totally absorbed in your work, they told us. Expect to work long hours and long weeks for a long time and know that this is a job in which you are never “off duty.”

Almost in the same breath, though, came the warnings that Heads cannot afford to lose sight of the world beyond the schoolhouse door. Stay attuned to the needs of your own family, make time for the physical exercise that will give you the stamina you need, broaden yourself through travel and reflection, keep your avocations, and insist upon vacations to refresh and restore your vision.

In closing, we pass along one Head’s simple yet comprehensive prescription for success:

TEACH!
LISTEN!
TAKE RISKS – TRY NEW THINGS.
BE SURE THIS IS WHAT YOU WANT TO DO MORE THAN
ANYTHING IN THE WORLD.
