

T.R.U.S.T.

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When I took my first head of school position, I had the impression it meant I was at the top of the organizational chart, and I was in control. Whatever I wanted, I got; whatever I desired, it came true.

Experience, maturity, and a good old dose of humility soon proved that to be pious and wrong. What I have come to understand is that the biblical principle taught in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 is actually the greatest truth I can live by as a head of school:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

This simple biblical truth is the key to a functioning head of school / board chair relationship. God did not design us to function alone. God designed all humans to be relational; the need for relationships is God-ordained, and so relationships are healthiest when grounded in biblical principles.

The operation of a school is a “dirty” business. Spills on carpets, hands on walls, explosions of markers, and the slamming of lockers are never done in a clean manner (and we wish those were the dirtiest things we encountered). What we do every day, while rewarding, is messy and difficult. In the midst of all that, who wants to spend time dealing with relationship issues between the board chair and head of school? As we say in the Euler household, “Ain’t nobody got time for that!”

Yet this relationship maintenance is crucial. John Littleford, who has served as head of school for 18 years, a teacher for 25 years, and a board member and chair of schools and nonprofit agencies, has this to say about the sad state of head of school turnover:

Almost eighty percent of all heads of schools are fired. They do not leave of their own volition. Thirty years ago many heads served long terms of office and most left under their own steam. While the job today is more complicated and pressured, and while parents, boards, students, alumni, faculty and community are all more demanding than thirty years ago, there appear to be a number of specific factors which have led to the early termination of heads. (2015)




This high level of turnover for heads of schools is sad. Could the turnover be directly impacted by the relationship between head of school and board chair? One factor that impacts the turnover rate, and ultimately the relationship between the head of school and board chair, is trust. As Stephen Covey said, “Trust truly is the one thing that changes everything” (2006). So how is T.R.U.S.T. established?

Together

The adventure we call “school” begins and ends with being *together*. A head of school and board chair must understand that they accomplish more together. The National Association of Independent Schools lists six aspects of leadership that the head and board must share (2013). Accepting that the head of school and board chair are together in this journey is crucial to the long-term health of the school. Cooperation in decisions, policy implementation, personnel decisions, vision setting, and other major decisions allows trust to develop. The running of a school is not a job to be done alone; it is a responsibility to take seriously, together. Togetherness builds trust and long-lasting unity.

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Real



So many relationships in our culture are fake, but this relationship will never be long-lasting or effective if it does not have a foundation of real living. A veteran head of school told me that one of the best ways he had found to foster a relationship with his board members was simply to have dinner with each board member and his or her spouse. Bring your spouse along and establish a personal relationship that is real and growing. This one simple element allows the head of school and board member to engage socially, rather than have a relationship strictly concerned with school business. The head of school / board relationship should be as much about growing and doing life together as it is about accountability on the job. This begins with both sides seeing each other as real people and not just coworkers in school business. A real relationship will lay the groundwork for lifelong trust.

Understanding

Life is difficult, and, as a head of school, I must understand that I—and my board chair—will make mistakes. Both parties must acknowledge that it is okay to make mistakes because of mutual trust. The focus must be on the relationship. Mistakes are an opportunity for growth.

Both the head of school and board chair must understand this is a responsibility that is carried out humbly. God has

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graciously laid out a plan to address our mistakes. In the relationship, ego must take a back seat to understanding. “An innate understanding of the other’s work style also helps you overcome built-in disconnects to either individual’s background or aspirations” (Nieberding 2016). Build off of each other’s strengths.

Supportive

Recently, I was having a difficult time. The troubles on my mind were unrelated to the work of our school, but Kevin, my board chair, called me to talk. “This is a Tim and Kevin talk,” he said, “not a board chair / head of school talk.” He cared. He was supportive not only as my boss, but as my friend. Since then, I have known Kevin cares about me as a person and not just as an employee or the head of school. He is invested in my life.

The relationship between the head of school and board chair is a two-way street. A head of school ought to care about the board chair in the same manner. Being supportive includes constantly holding each other up in prayer and caring more about the person than the title.

Together

This discussion closes the same way it began. Effectiveness in the relationship begins and ends with the understanding that success is accomplished *together*. No one is an island. The relationship must extend beyond the board room and into the living room. The board chair / head of school relationship is not a competition, but a partnership. It takes work, time, and ultimately, a give-and-take mentality.

T.R.U.S.T. does not happen overnight. Trust is gained through real-life living, understanding each other’s heart, and supporting one another consistently. If the board chair and the head of school understand the most important relationship on the school’s campus is their relationship, the school will see decades of growth and prosperity. Determine right now to seek the development of trust, and together you will be stronger. “Two are better than one!”

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