

Mergers: Creating Excellent and Efficient Leadership Teams

Previously in *I&P*, we discussed the potential benefits of a merger between two or more schools.¹ Should you take this route, as Board Chair and School Head, you will have the ultimate responsibility in selecting the leaders as the schools merge.

The School Head

The Board of Trustees selects the School Head and the Head Support and Evaluation Committee (HSEC) works directly with the School Head,² determining major objectives and using Essential Expectations to assess performance.³ In a merger between multiple private schools, one of the most difficult decisions is choosing who will lead the new entity. Likely, several candidates stand at the ready to be the school's CEO—the current Heads of the merging schools. But the Board may decide to look outward, recruiting someone new with fresh leadership perspectives.

The first step is for the Board to form a new Head Support and Evaluation Committee. This group conducts the search and then remains in place at least through the completion of the Head's first year to build predictability and supportiveness, ensuring the Head's success. Once you have created this committee, its primary task is to create an ideal candidate profile. Review ISM's list of Essential Expectations and ISM's Leadership Traits to familiarize yourself with research-derived ideal Head leadership indicators. The ideal School Head must exhibit a perceived humility, supportiveness, flexibility, and moral and ethical uprightness to be an effective leader. Understanding the combination of character and executive leadership skills necessary for the new Head is an essential starting point.

Once the leadership profile is created, examine each current School Head to ascertain if one of the strong individuals of the merging institutions could be an effective leader of the newly created institution. If the HSEC determines there are strong candidates from the existing schools, the HSEC should interview those current candidates and hire one from that group, or eliminate them all.

Many search committees elect to embark on a Head search process that involves interviewing internal and external candidates simultaneously. ISM discourages this process. One mistake often arises when attempting to select a Head between internal and external candidates. The committee is keenly aware of the internal candidate's strengths and weaknesses. However, the external candidate is not as intimately known. Therefore, the hiring committee runs the risk of overlooking an extraordinarily strong internal candidate because they merely recognize the outside candidate through the interview process, limiting a comprehensive understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

Said differently, we know everything—good and bad—about the internal candidates, but we know mostly the external candidate's good qualities. This decision becomes profoundly unfair to internal candidates as it can unintentionally create a bias against the internal candidates' strengths. Weaknesses

frequently become far more significant than they are when compared to only advantages and strengths. To resolve this, first process internal candidates and hire (or not) one from the group that best matches the profile and is determined to be the best fit as the new Head. If the committee is not convinced any of the internal candidates adequately represents the hiring profile, eliminate them all and then focus only on external candidates.

Once the new School Head is hired, forming the Leadership Team becomes the Head's first job.⁴

The Leadership Team

Consider our fictional K–12 school, Exempli Gratia Academy. The newly merged school enrolls approximately 750 students, including about 60 students per grade. However, the Board intends to expand to 80 students per grade, growing total enrollment to 1,040, to maximize efficiencies. The new Head determines the following leadership positions are essential for operational excellence: Lower, Middle, and Upper School Heads; Director of Finance and Operations; Admission Director; Advancement Director; and Marketing Director.

Once the positions are determined, the next step is to write a comprehensive job description for each one. In most merger situations, there will be at least two candidates for each position. We recommend the School Head consider the following when assembling the Leadership Team.

- Choose individuals with the skills and experience necessary to fulfill the roles successfully.
- Assess the fit between the Head and the candidates' work style preferences.
- Hire people with the ability to be professional in demeanor and actions.
- Hire results-oriented people.
- Hire leaders that inspire faculty and staff members.
- Hire leaders who possess professional intuition that helps them make difficult decisions wisely and quickly.
- Hire leaders passionate about lifelong learning, who thrive in an ethos of professional growth and renewal.

In mergers, as much as possible, the School Head should choose a Leadership Team comprising a cross-section of leaders from the former schools. Further, keep other key positions within the new school that former leaders can expertly occupy. Retaining many of the academic leaders and teachers from the original schools helps parents, teachers, and students through the transition.

Leadership structures are often considered large and cumbersome, especially in small schools. The basic management structure necessary to support a school of 200 students is nearly identical to a school with 1000+ students. Understand that the efficiencies gained in merging schools come from the Head and the Head's direct reports, usually the highest-paid staff at

a school.⁵ The number of student deans, college placement staff members, psychologists, learning specialists, etc., must be larger to support total enrollment. In considering support staff size, consider the following.

- The higher the tuition charged, the more flexibility the school has for overall staff size.
- Regardless of school size, an academic administrator can effectively oversee 18 to 20 teachers. Staff your school so that faculty development and job performance occur effectively.
- Diverse learning styles increase the number of teachers and support staff required to support student learning. If your school falls into the product category—ISM's term for schools with high admission standards, strong standardized test scores, outstanding next-level placement records—you'll need fewer faculty and support staff members than schools that have a process-based program, those with

highly individualized programs, focused strongly on serving academically and/or behaviorally heterogeneous student populations.

- Large price schools (1,000+ enrollment), ISM's term for schools that feature low tuition, have more flexibility in their staffing size than small price schools. Large price schools are far more efficient to operate than small price schools.

School mergers present an opportunity to design an effective and efficient structure to sustain the new school's operational excellence. Thinking carefully about how the organizational structure will yield benefits for decades. [I&P](#)

¹ See "Mergers: Scandalous Nonsense or Strategic Alliance?" *Ideas & Perspectives*, 45-7-27.

² See "The Head Support and Evaluation Committee: An Update," *I&P*, 42-8-29.

³ See "School Head Evaluation: Essential Expectations," *I&P*, 41-13-52. Further, review ISM's articles "The Private-Independent School Headship: A Management and Leadership Excellence Formulation," *I&P*, 32-1-5, and "Board Leadership: ISM Research Report," 33-12-47.

⁴ See "Essential Expectations of Senior Administrators," *I&P*, 42-9-36.

⁵ See "The ISM Circle: Creating Your School's Ideal Administrative Structure," *I&P*, 44-1-1.