



# The Most Overlooked Component of School Success

Many elements contribute to a high-functioning and successful school. You need a strong strategic plan, a healthy faculty culture, a strategic approach to admission and retention, and more. But in ISM's 45+ years working with private-independent schools all over the world, we have observed one other factor that has a significant impact on private school viability and success—a great leader.

An outstanding leader can transform a school and take it to new heights, whereas poor leaders can cause serious challenges for schools.

What makes a great school leader? **A vital component is the Head's own well-being.** ISM's research has found that the well-being of the School Head truly influences school outcomes, including faculty culture, student enrollment, and the Head's long-term success.

Here's why the Head's well-being has such a consequential impact on school culture and viability, and the steps all Heads should take to support themselves and others.

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## The Impact of the Head's Well-Being on Their Schools

In a recent ISM research study, we surveyed 131 School Heads who had an average length of 25 years in education. The results, while not causal, indicated that School Head well-being absolutely affects personal and professional success, leading to improved faculty culture and overall school performance, including enrollment demand. Our study also found that school performance, the support the Head experiences, and the faculty culture simultaneously influence the Head's well-being.

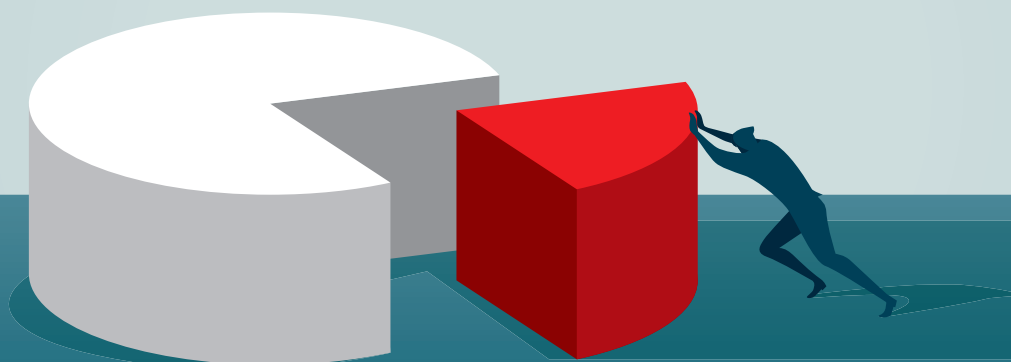
This is consistent with the research on “emotional contagion,” where the leader's emotional functioning and attitude have a tremendous impact on those who follow.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Seligman defined “well-being” through the acronym PERMA.<sup>2</sup> He posited that the Positive Affect, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement experienced by a person determines his or her well-being. The Diener Flourishing Scale<sup>3</sup> measures these essential aspects of PERMA and is the measure of a person's well-being.

In our study, leaders who self-scored themselves as flourishing also reported strong faculty cultures. This suggests that it makes **strategic sense for School Heads to invest time in their own well-being** since they are also **investing in their school's culture**.

This concept is difficult for many leaders who find themselves overcommitted to their schools. They see that commitment as part of their vocation and service, even when it negatively impacts their personal and family lives. **Their well-being often takes a backseat to “getting the job done.”**

Given the centrality of the quality of the executive leader and faculty culture in driving school outcomes, including enrollment demand and student success, it is essential that the definition of a quality executive school leader now includes “flourishing” as an element.





## Ensuring the School Head's Well-Being

Even School Heads who are supported by their Boards can feel alone and isolated in their roles. With no peers on campus, they report to their Boards and oversee all other school employees.

Heads have a limited ability to form personal relationships with their own school administrators because of the intrinsic conflicts that would be created. They often can't benefit from the "checks and balances" that come from working through ideas with others, and feel increased stress levels associated with the challenges of leadership.

To alleviate the stress that comes with headship, School Heads must learn how to better delegate authority and develop a professional support network outside school. Even though Heads have other administrators to help resolve problems, they often tackle too many issues alone. When a Head makes every school issue a personal concern, eventually every problem—no matter whose purview—will come to him or her.

### Delegate Authority

Heads could manage their time more effectively, lead the school more efficiently, and prioritize their well-being if they used available administrative resources.

#### Three Ways to Allow Others to Support You

***Don't bypass the administrative staff.*** Every Leadership Team member has a specific set of duties. The Business Manager's job, for instance, is to oversee the school's financial management, take care of all small problems related to that area, and evaluate and present the larger problems to you only if necessary. Allow staff members to do their jobs and you will have more time available to address major issues.

***Don't let school constituents bypass the administrative staff.*** Often, even when a Head tries not to interfere, some people still bypass the administrators. For example, when parents have an issue with the school, perhaps concerning a teacher, they may call the Head directly. Don't allow this to happen. Politely explain your school's hierarchy and redirect parents to the appropriate liaison. Administrators should keep you up-to-date so that, if you feel the situation needs further attention, you can step in.

***Be frugal with commitments to meetings.*** Unfortunately, many Heads feel obligated to be present at every school meeting. Naturally, School Heads should attend Board, Leadership Team, and departmental meetings, but there is no need to attend all of them. Go only to those requiring your attendance. For those meetings you must attend, make sure the agendas are clear and the meetings run as efficiently as possible.

Similarly, the School Head should not try to go to every athletic, musical, and dramatic event. Throughout the school year, you should choose which events you will attend, making sure to see a sampling of each, and then let another administrator represent you at the other events.

### Rely on Peer Support

School Heads must know with whom they can discuss school problems. The Head should be able to go to the Board President for Board issues and their Leadership Team for operational concerns.

However, School Heads need to connect with others who understand the trials of leading a private school—preferably the Heads of noncompetitive schools who share similar struggles. This camaraderie can help the Head feel supported by others who walk the same path. Here are a few ways to develop your peer-support system.

#### Two Ways to Find Your Community

<sup>1</sup>Emotional contagion is the well-researched phenomenon where people “catch” feelings from others. See “The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior,” Sigal G. Barsade *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), pp. 644–675.

<sup>2</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Flourishing: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (Atria Books, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Diener, E., Wirtz, D.; Tov, W.; Kim-Prieto, C.; Choi, D.; Oishi, S.; & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). “New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings,” *Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247–26

Meet with fellow School Heads. Ideally, you want to find Heads with whom you feel at ease. Confidentiality is essential. Choose Heads who lead schools that are not directly in competition with yours. You can then troubleshoot issues and discuss sensitive matters without concern over disclosing “secrets.”

Join a virtual group or an organization specific to School Heads. There are listservs and other online communication platforms where Heads at private schools pose questions and provide answers. The advantage of these online settings is that you receive various perspectives from all over the country. Eventually, you will find other Heads who share your concerns and may respond privately by email.

ISM is optimally positioned to offer a program that provides Heads with the support they need to thrive. That’s why we created Platinum Membership, an Advisory Board for School Heads.

ISM’s Platinum Membership is designed to make the Head’s social-emotional well-being a top priority, benefiting the Head, the performance of those around the Head, and the success of the school.

#### Through this program, Heads receive:

- **Transformative monthly learning sessions** that provide extensive research and guidance to strengthen their leadership skills and school strategies
- **Monthly one-on-one calls with the program’s Executive Mentor** to ask tough questions and get honest feedback
- **A peer network of fellow Heads** who are facing similar challenges and can share their insight and experiences
- **All the benefits of ISM’s Gold membership** for their entire school, including free webinars, *Ideas & Perspectives*, and discounts on events

Amid today’s uncertainty, Heads need more support than ever to perform their roles to the best of their abilities. Learn more about Platinum membership: [go.isminc.com/platinum-heads-peersolutions](https://go.isminc.com/platinum-heads-peersolutions)

