

## **A Win-Win-Win Strategy**

By: Dr. Steven C. Lorch

When a head of school is an effective leader, in harmony with the strategic direction set by the board, everyone – head of school, board, and school community – wins. The one key strategy that most strongly promotes a virtuous cycle of leadership growth for the head and strategic thinking for the board is a well functioning head support and evaluation committee.

### **Getting Started**

Who? The first step in setting up a head support and evaluation committee is selecting its members. It's by far the most important step, and it's very easy to get wrong.

The right way to staff the committee is with members with whom both the board and the head of school are completely comfortable and in whom they have complete confidence. As with all professional development, unless the supervisee trusts the process and feels completely safe, progress will be halting and limited, at best. Individuals who inspire high levels of comfort and confidence tend to be committed, passionate supporters of both the school and the head. With the right composition, the committee's process will be marked by openness, free-flowing discussion, diverse points of view, and risk-taking.

Getting the right people onto the committee is easier said than done. At the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, we went without a head support and evaluation committee for five years because we couldn't identify the right participants. During that time, the board president and the Executive Committee served as placeholders, with the president taking on the support role and the Executive Committee the evaluation of the head, in addition to their usual functions. Two years ago, the board and the head finally identified three people – two board members and one member from outside the school community, a former head of school – who satisfy all the criteria. The resulting committee has been so effective that everyone concerned is convinced that it was the correct call not to create a committee earlier, until it could be constituted with the right members.

The most popular alternatives to this approach to staffing the committee are (a) appointing senior board leaders whom the head of school respects and whose leadership contributions s/he acknowledges, or (b) selecting committee members as one would an arbitration panel: the board chair chooses one member, the head another, and the two members choose a third. While both selection strategies seem plausible, they tend to undermine the committee's work even before it starts – because not every member inspires the complete comfort and confidence of both board and head. Even one committee member whom not everyone completely trusts will engender caution, guardedness, and defensiveness.

### **Next Steps**

What? Once the committee has been constituted, defining its work comes next. At the outset, it is important to determine whether the overall approach will be capacity building or correcting deficiencies. Typically, unless there are very serious questions about the head's suitability, the capacity-building model will be selected. The underlying assumption of this model is that the head is performing competently, and the committee's role is to help him or her become even more effective. The alternative to this, the deficiency model, would be chosen only if the board wants to give the head a final opportunity to overcome one or more shortcomings, and unless the head succeeds in this one chance, the school will be seeking a replacement.

To build the head's capacity, the committee and the head need to agree annually on four to six areas of growth for the head that are critical to the school in the coming year. Most of these goals will be selected from among the school's strategic priorities. If there is a strategic plan in place, they will tend to coincide with the most important, or the most challenging, of the strategic tasks for which the head is responsible that year. In addition,

one or two goals may be areas for professional growth that could greatly enhance the head's overall effectiveness. The goals need to be selected carefully, as most of the committee's work will be shaped by them.

Once the goals are identified, the committee and the head collaboratively envision what progress toward each will look like and identify how the head and the committee will know if the desired progress has been achieved. In most cases, this will entail some data gathering that the head or committee members will undertake and will share with the committee at subsequent meetings during the year. Because the data gathering is dictated by the very specific and carefully formulated goals, this model has no place for a general survey of the head's overall strengths and weaknesses, whether addressed to the faculty, the parents, or the board.

How? At each stage of the process, the committee both supports and challenges the head. When the committee is supporting the head, it (a) provides a trusted sounding board for the head to share the challenges s/he faces in progressing toward identified goals, (b) helps the head think through the challenges, come to new understandings, identify promising strategies or refine existing ones, and sometimes redefine a goal or an indicator of progress in mid-course, (c) listens to the head actively and empathically, (d) contextualizes areas for improvement within the head's overall effectiveness, (e) reminds the head that an awareness of shortcomings and commitment to working on them is itself a sign of strength, and (f) celebrates successes. In addition, at times the committee (g) invites the head to identify problems outside of the annual goals, issues that trouble the head enough to keep him or her awake at night, and offers perspectives or suggests resources to help address them, (h) troubleshoots and brainstorms ways for the head to maintain as healthy a life balance as possible, and (i) serves as an advocate for the head with other constituencies.

The committee fulfills its responsibility to challenge the head by (a) scheduling meetings and setting agendas in ways that maintain momentum, (b) encouraging the head to set high standards and take appropriate risks, (c) helping the head refine the goals and indicators so that they directly address the school's strategic priorities or the head's personal challenges, (d) holding the head accountable to progress towards, or meet, the agreed upon goals and indicators, and (e) promoting the head's self-awareness through feedback and "holding up a mirror."

The potential of the committee is best realized when it is deeply committed to both of its responsibilities, support as well as challenge.

When? While there are no hard-and-fast rules as to how frequently the committee must meet with the head, it is hard to maintain momentum with less than four meetings per year:

- Over the summer, the committee meets with the head to set goals and select indicators. The outcome of this meeting is a written list of annual performance goals. At Schechter Manhattan, this process often takes two meetings, giving the head and committee members ample time to think through the complex issues that arise before coming to closure.
- During the year, the committee meets a couple of times to check in with the head, monitor progress toward goals, including looking at interim data, offer support, and identify any mid-course corrections that may be necessary.
- In May or June, the committee reviews the data and completes its evaluation.

The work of the committee comes before the board twice a year: in September, to present the head's annual goals, and in June, to review the head's goals and the outcomes of the evaluation. In addition, the committee may be charged with the task of negotiating all provisions of the head's contract renewal with the exception of remuneration (which is typically handled by the president and/or the treasurer), and the outcome of this discussion would be reported to the board when the contract is up for renewal.

## And the Winners Are....

The head of school, the board, and the school are all transformed for the better by the work of head support and evaluation:

The head gains a group of supportive advocates who serve as a sounding board to help him or her think and reflect about job performance and develop as a professional. This is a rare gift, as heads of school often feel isolated from a professional learning community for themselves (though they sometimes function as members of professional learning communities for others, namely their supervisees) and severely limited in resources to which, or to whom, they can turn for support, guidance, and direction.

The head also benefits from clarity of job responsibilities and work priorities. Without a discrete list of annual performance goals, each of the myriad responsibilities of school administration looms large, and every new issue that arises competes for the head's attention, focus, and best thinking.

Finally, the head benefits from the security of having a well defined process of supervision and evaluation and a predictable means of assessing his or her own prospects of re-employment.

The board also benefits from the work of the head support and evaluation committee: it fulfills the board's often neglected (or perfunctorily discharged) responsibility of supervising its sole employee, and does so in a way that systematically promotes his or her professional growth; in addition, it strengthens the board's focus on strategic issues and priorities and deflects board members' attention from operational distractions; and, moreover, it inoculates itself, and the school, from the upheaval of unnecessary leadership transitions.

The school is a winner, too: the interactions between the committee members and the head of school model collaborative inquiry and constructive criticism that carry over to many other relationships and situations; furthermore, as the head of school changes and grows, his or her vision, purposes, and learning ripple outward, intensify and deepen the culture of teacher and student learning, and influence the assumptions, attitudes, and habits of teachers, students, and parents alike; and, finally, as the head develops new skills and practices that promote improved student learning and welfare, the gap between good intentions and effective action narrows, with positive outcomes for the entire school community.

A well constructed head support and evaluation committee marshals its members' thoughtful analysis, high regard, and inspired action and channels them in the service of a school's highest moral purposes. Designed to enhance the capacity of the head, the board, and the school as a whole, it's a classic win-win-win strategy for all concerned.