

ACCS Distinctive Schools Series

School Administration: Head of School Searches and the Liberal Art of Leadership

The first opinion which one forms of a prince, and of his understanding, is by observing the men he has around him.—Machiavelli

Perfect men I take to be those who can blend practical ability with philosophy, and who can achieve both of two best and greatest ends — the life of public utility as men of affairs and the calm and tranquil life as students of philosophy. For there are three kinds of life: the life of action, the life of thought, and the life of enjoyment. —Plutarch

He who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander.
—Aristotle

He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.
—Sun Tzu

It is typical of the most successful and durable institutions that they induce in their members an intellectual and moral growth beyond a man's original capacities. —Peter Drucker

A social life cannot exist among a number of people unless a government is set up to look after the common good. —Aquinas

The so most rare among men is diligent in painful things without wearisomeness and constant in good will to do all things well.
—Roger Ascham

When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. —Proverbs 29:2

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. —Proverbs 11:14

With upright heart, he shepherded them, and guided them with his skillful hand. —Psalm 78:72

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. —Luke 12:48

Aristotle was one of the first to pose the question of how to perform an executive search when he inquired, “(Who) is to be the supreme power in the state— the multitude? Or the wealthy? Or the good? Or the one best man?” Aristotle wanted to know the anatomy of fitness for the leadership class in society. The search for the ideal administrator goes back to the ancients yet continues today as boards search for qualified administrators. Every month, a new school posts on the ACCS Job Board looking for a new head of school or other administrative position. Once individuals begin to apply, should candidates be assessed by virtue of character, charisma, capability, or some other criteria? In this article, the first section provides philosophical background for the task of administration and the subsequent sections are for practical aspects of assessing candidates.

Generalist First, Specialist Second

If the educational philosopher Mortimer Adler (1902-2001) were consulting with a school conducting a head of school search, he'd say that every school leader should be a generalist first, and a specialist second. In an essay entitled, "Every Executive a Generalist First, and a Specialist Second," he writes, "The cultured generalist has become a vanishing species in all walks of life: Hence, we are witnessing the disappearance of the kind of leadership sorely needed in society today." Adler lamented that economic specialization in society had fragmented leaders into narrow specialists instead of men of liberal learning and broad vision. He writes,

To prevent the imminent demise of general culture, the barbarism of specialization must be overcome from the time of its onset... Every executive should be a generalist first and a specialist second -- and be able to be both harmoniously.

Adler blames the elective system that began at Harvard in the 19th century for the turn from liberal education of leaders to specialized technical training. Despite our commitment to broad and general learning with students in the classroom, most of our leaders and trustees did not get this themselves due to the 20th century factory system of education (eg The Platoon School in Gary, IN). The days of entrepreneurial polymaths like Benjamin Franklin have long past which impacts the sort of candidates you interview for administration.

The Factory System

Education is not a business nor is it a factory yet many classical Christian heads of school see themselves as business managers or school executives more than they are scholars or educational philosophers. Raymond Callahan writes in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that Have Shaped the Administration of Public Schools*,

By 1910, the scale of operations in both business and education had produced large organizations, so it was reasonable and even legitimate to expect the borrowing of ideas and techniques from one set of institutions to another. But the evidence indicates that the extent of borrowing (by the school) has been too great."

The principles of scientific management introduced by Frederick Taylor influenced the management of factories. Taylor's pursuit of efficient production in the factory could be summarized as specialization, standardization, and centralization. Public schools largely followed the leadership of industry titans like Rockefeller and Carnegie who also gave testimony to Taylor's principles of scientific management. The problem is that the manufacture of steel and zip ties is not the same as the formation of humans.

A headmaster is part educator, part pastor, and part businessman, but modern educational leadership programs place emphasis on the educational leader as businessman. In 1900, Teachers College at Chicago offered only two courses in administration. By 1914, the number rose to eight courses, and by 1925 there were more than 25 courses in administration available. One course was entitled Educational Publicity and its focus was to train administrators to carry about publicity campaigns. Other specialized courses in administration covered an array of practical topics such as School Surveys, School Finance, Business Administration, Administration of Teaching Personnel, and Curriculum Administration. The entire emphasis was on the "how" of administration with little, if any, space for inquiry into the larger general purposes which administration is designed to serve. At the peak of administration courses in 1925, the president of Denver Teacher Union warned, "The greatest danger that besets superintendents at the present time is that they will become merely business managers." Although the times have changed, the danger for leaders remains the same— to be exclusively a generalist or to be exclusively a specialist. In searching for a head of school, we should obey Adler's dictum that, "Every executive should be a generalist first and a specialist second — and be able to be both harmoniously."

The Lost Tools of Leadership

Classical Christian schools have recovered the tools of learning in the classroom, but perhaps it is time for us to recover the "lost tools of leadership" in school administration. Consider these oft-quoted lines from Dorothy Sayers with the ideas of "leadership" replacing "learning."

Is not the great defect of our leadership education today... that although we often succeed in teaching school leaders “subjects,” we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to lead a school: they learn everything, except the art of leading.

We teach administrators technical areas like curriculum, independent school finance, board governance, and strategic planning, but these are not tools or arts, they are subjects. Sayers writes, “‘Subjects’ of some kind there must be, of course. One cannot learn the use of a tool by merely waving it in the air; neither can one learn the theory of grammar without learning an actual language, or learn to argue and orate without speaking about something in particular.” In the same way we have recovered the liberal arts in the classroom, we must do so in administration.

The 20th century management expert Peter Drucker, describes the vision you should have in your head of school search, “Management is thus what tradition used to call a liberal art: ‘liberal’ because it deals with the fundamentals of knowledge, self-knowledge, wisdom, and leadership; ‘art’ because it is practice and application.”

In baseball recruiting, scouts look at prospects and analyze them according to five physical tools: speed, throwing, fielding, hitting for power, and hitting for average. In assessing an administrator candidate, we will discuss four tools of leadership that you should be looking at: *producing* in teaching and learning (the what), *integrating* in marketing and admissions (the who), *administering* in finance and operations (the how), and *entrepreneurship* in fundraising and facilities (the why and when). No school leader excels in all four of these tools, but each should be dominant in at least two of the tools. *Producing*, *integrating*, *administering*, and *entrepreneurship* are the tools of leadership while teaching and learning, marketing and admissions, finance and operations, and fundraising and facilities are the subjects, or grist for the mill to use Sayers’ language.

According to management scholar Ichak Adizes, these four leadership tools are like vitamins and if one is absent, there will be corresponding patterns of organizational problems that appear due to administration’s deficiencies. If *entrepreneurship* is absent but *producing* is strong, the school will be effective in the short-term but not the

long-term, because everyone will be ruled by the tyranny of the urgent. Teaching and learning in the classroom will be strong, but the school as a whole will be reactive, not proactive, in its posture. If *administering* is absent but *integrating* is strong, the school will be able to recruit new families, but lack the efficient operational and logistical infrastructure to serve them well. Schools with strong *integrating* but weak *administering* will take everything on a case by case basis. The school might be able to fill empty seats and create a long carline, but they cannot figure out how to setup the cones at the curb or manage a student information system. While the four tools do not need to be present in one head of school, he must surround himself with those who do possess them. Machiavelli wrote, “The first opinion of which one forms of a prince, and of his understanding, is by observing the men he has around him.”

Producing in Teaching and Learning

These four tools of leadership provide a framework by which boards can evaluate potential candidates for leadership. The first tool of school leadership is *producing*, and this refers to delivering classical Christian educational services to children. Whether or not a headmaster needs to have previously served as a teacher is up for debate; what is nonnegotiable is that the individual must love learning and children. Producing is one of the four management tools needed for a school to reach maturity, and it means that the individual is a knowledgeable achiever. The first and foremost role of any school is to effectively produce results by delivering on the promises made to parents in the admissions tour and the family interview. The result to be produced—the school’s basic reason for its existence—is to satisfy customer needs by effectively educating the child. This role is developed in an organization through all those activities that focus on producing the service being offered to the marketplace (e.g., instruction, assessment, classroom management, athletics and arts, etc). This is a high calling for leaders of those schools that subscribe to an all-encompassing Christian *paideia* where discipleship, scholarship, and partnership are combined. There are also great expectations to manage as administrators deal with a parents’ most precious possessions: their faith, their finances, and their family.

School leaders and consultants often disagree on whether administrators should be actively *producing* the teaching and learning in the classroom themselves. Looking back in the tradition to cathedral and monastic schools as well as the first universities, one does not see a sharp distinction between teacher and administrator in the way one does today. But as Dr. Chris Schlect of New St. Andrews College puts it, our goal is not to relive a previous era, like a Civil War reenactment at a local park; rather, we are to recover the right tools for discipling the next generation. So, regardless of how a school divides up the labor, realize that the more you specialize, the harder it is to preserve a broad and general vision. Organizational silos are largely a modern phenomenon based upon the strait-jacket of specialization applied to personnel structure. It is helpful to recall that the titles “Headmaster” and “Principal” historically implied that he is the head, first, or model teacher, for the other faculty members to follow.

Whether you are hiring a principal or a headmaster, you need a result-oriented individual who understands both the vision and the practice of classical Christian education. Throughout the cCe world, the title “Headmaster” is now applied to one who is more focused on the future, fundraising, working with the board, recruiting talent, supporting their direct reports, and campus planning. They are stronger in *entrepreneurship* in most, but not all, cases. The “Principal,” or upper school/lower school head, tends to focus on teacher observations, running faculty meetings, handling issues with students and parents, and overseeing day to day classroom instruction and activity. They are often better at *producing* in the sense that they are responding to multitudinous day-to-day needs. Schools structure these roles differently so it will be important for your board to understand the differences so they can know what they need the candidate to bring to the area of teaching and learning.

Because the main business of an academy is teaching and learning, *producing* results in the classroom has to be a non-negotiable tool that the Principal candidate must possess. For an established school seeking a headmaster, the headmaster at least needs to enthusiastically endorse the vision even if they themselves are not training the teachers. For a younger school with only one administrator, it is probably most important that the administrator is able to

train and support teachers and respond well to issues with students and parents.

Integrating in Marketing and Admissions

The second tool of school leadership is *integrating* in marketing and admissions. In *Conviction to Lead*, Seminary President Dr. Albert Mohler writes,

The problem is that the evangelical Christian world is increasingly divided between two groups: Believers and Leaders. The believers are driven by deep and passionate beliefs but could not lead a two car funeral procession. The leaders are masters of motivation, vision, strategy, and execution but are not sure what they believe or why it matters.

Headmasters can fall off the horse in either direction — by being so focused on the permanent things that they lack practical ability to solve problems, or they are so situationally oriented that they lose sight of the bigger *telos* of the classical Christian school. Integrating belief and leadership practice is especially important in marketing and admissions because it can be hard to explain this model of education to parents in tours, open houses, and messaging.

Marketing and admissions is a lot less about superficial ways of grabbing attention (billboards, ads, the local parade, etc.) and a lot more about selling your current parents on the long-term benefits of classical Christian education at your school. Retention is the motor for growing enrollment, because your current parents will tell their friends if they are satisfied with what is happening with the teaching and learning. If there is not repeat demand from parents at your school, you almost certainly have a problem with tool one, teaching and learning. Parents will tell their friends from church about a school that blesses their kids, and gripe about the school or teacher who does not.

In a humbling study entitled, “Leading Classical Christian Schools: An Exploratory Study of Headmasters,” the average tenure of a headmaster in ACCS schools was shown to be less than three years and that most ACCS headmasters lack meaningful training and experience.

While it is true that this research from 2015 needs to be updated, and that it mirrors statistics in non-classical Christian schools, most can anecdotally confirm that the headmaster and administrator roles in classical Christian schools are not always known for their longevity.

One element of this transience may have to do with a failure to effectively *integrate* the various functions of the school into a harmonious whole—a more challenging task than most realize. One who is a generalist first and a specialist second is most likely to be diligent in painful things without wearisomeness. The key in a search is ensuring that an administrator at least meets the minimum threshold for each tool and confirming that they are strong in at least of them. For new administrators, look for the presence of *producing*, *administering*, *integrating*, and *entrepreneurship* even if they might lack industry-specific experience in the subjects of classical Christian teaching and learning, marketing and admissions, finance and operations, and fundraising and facilities.

The *integrating* tool is a nonnegotiable because for a lead administrator, because they must excel in bringing a unified direction to different people and different departments. Whether the individual is indirect or direct, introverted or extroverted, overt or subtle, etc says more about personality than proficiency in the tool of integrating. Administrators bring peace into situations with conflict, they find resolution when tradeoffs need to be made between competition priorities, and they are able to think institutionally but act personally. Avoid putting someone at the helm that does not know how to get the best out of the individual stakeholders and integrate them into a common vision.

Administering in Finance and Operations

Sun Tzu wrote, “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.” Sound organization sense is essential to efficient administration. Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management, was right in this regard; he just neglected the other tools of leadership. These tools are integrally-related in that success in utilizing one leads to improvement in another.

The third tool of school leadership is administering in finance and operations, which tends to matter more once teaching and learning, and marketing and admissions are in good repair. In other words, if teachers want to work for the school leaders, and parents want to partner with the school teachers, then you can work on improving efficiencies in finance and operations. It matters little if the organization is as efficient as a factory when no parent wants their child to attend and no teacher wants to work there.

Every school needs at least one person who can create policies, draft handbooks, design efficient processes, write budgets, and make sure that the operational handbooks are actually followed by all. This person ensures that issues are not handled on a case by case basis and that uniform procedures are implemented in a tactful manner. The key when evaluating a candidate who is strong in *administering* in finance and operations is to ensure that they also value the gifts of the integrator, the producer, and the entrepreneur. This skillset becomes especially important as the school grows in size and complexity.

Administration is listed as one of the spiritual gifts by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that this is one of the ways that God has equipped ministries to move towards enduring impact. One of the obvious marks of the person with administrative gifting is the ability to focus on details. This sort of leader will be eager to create and follow organizational rules; without rules, the school will move towards tyranny or anarchy over time. The type of tasks that someone gifted in administration would do in a school vary but could include overseeing building maintenance, setting financial policy, posting teacher openings, drafting contracts, and crafting budgets. Great administrators think like engineers and solve problems in advance through great policies and training people in certain processes.

Entrepreneurship in Fundraising and Facilities

The fourth tool is *entrepreneurship* in fundraising and facilities, and this tool requires the leader to possess the cardinal virtue of fortitude. Fundraising and facilities mainly references building or expanding a campus rather than operating and maintaining the physical plant (which

refers to *administering*). This particular tool is most necessary for schools as they grow beyond 200 students serving grades K-12 or are expanding towards that end.

The tool of *entrepreneurship* is evident in leaders who are constantly talking about the future and the phases of the building plan and working with major donors. At less mature schools, this tool of leadership may not be vital initially but becomes essential in the future. In the beginning years, it often rests on the board in a very invested individual or two. Families are attracted to institutions with a sense of tradition, but also a sense of hopeful imagination about the future. As you search, it is important to see if candidates possess a sense of multi-year direction for the school. Identifying someone who can see through the fog and is willing to take risks is crucial as your school moves towards reaching maturity.

Entrepreneurship involves creativity and synthesis rather than detailed analysis, but is different from the way the words “creativity” or “innovation” are so often used in modern Christian schools. Those schools typically have no historical anchor and are ready to tear down any fence that impedes their path forward. *Entrepreneurship* leaders in classical Christian schools will identify needs in the market, create new programs, ask people to write checks, add new campuses, yet be able to do so in a way that is grounded in Christian piety, governed by theology, and guided by the classical Christian tradition.

The Myth of the Ideal Executive

As we seek to preserve western civilization through classical Christian education, we must be cognizant that modern western practices of leadership are largely impacted by business forces from the industrial revolution or through modern psychology (e.g., Abraham Maslow).

While these four tools of *Producing*, *Integrating*, *Administering*, and *Entrepreneurship* will help you assess candidates, we must abandon the expectation of hiring the individual who possesses all of these tools to mastery. In *The Ideal Executive: Why You Cannot Be One and What to Do About It*, Ichak Adizes argues that healthy organizations are led by complementary teams, who, like the fingers on a hand, all work together to accomplish the task.

Hopefully, with diligence, you will identify at least one candidate with mastery of two tools and proficiency in the others. Such a leader in your school, aware of the limitations of his own strengths can build administrative teams and a culture where these tools exist.

When you have selected your candidate, be sure to plan together with him how he will learn and grow professionally. Attend annually the Repairing the Ruins Conference with your Head of School, as many of his administration and faculty as possible, and at least one board member; this will spur lasting relationships and growth and commitment to classical Christian education.