

FREE GUIDE

New Head of School? 8 Pitfalls to Avoid (and How to Avoid Them)

INTRODUCTION

Being a new head of school is exciting, and it can also come with a set of challenges. Learn eight of the most common pitfalls, and how to avoid them for an effective first year that sets the right tone for your community.



“I bring my own shoes.”

Karen Eshoo
as Head of
Vistamar School

Pitfall 1: Trying to Fill a Hero's Shoes

If the recently departed head of your new school was beloved, it's natural that people will be comparing you to them, wondering how you'll stack up. Even if the former head was merely competent and respected, you'll be compared to them. This can be daunting for a new head so before you take the bait on how you'll fill a hero's shoes, consider how to set a different tone.

When Karen Eshoo became the new head of Vistamar School, whose founding head left after years of heroic leadership and much success, she was asked how she would fill his shoes. Her response? “I bring my own shoes!” They were high heels, by the way.

Karen had it right. Let people know what kind of leader you are right away. Avoid the tendency to be passive, to say you'll spend your first year listening so you can decide how to show up. Instead, signal right away in every possible way what people can expect from you in terms of style, process, and impact. Yes, of course you'll be listening in your first year, but you should also be leading and setting expectations. To avoid comparison, show your school community who you are, even as you bring the right amount of humility and curiosity to learn.

Pitfall 2: Being a Knight in Shining Armor (or: Being a Savior)

While it's less likely, you may also be taking over a school that had a crisis, a leader who was a mismatch or worse, a head who was disliked or let go. If this is the case, it can be tempting to move quickly to "solve" the crisis. But it's unlikely that there are any quick fixes. If there were, the board and staff would have used them already and you wouldn't be handed a crisis at all.

You're not there to save the day, and you should make that clear from day one. You're there for the long term, bringing vision and sustainability to the school. So, once again, defining your leadership style early and often will help you set appropriate expectations.

For example, many heads regret setting the open-door policy that effectively allows others to dictate how they spend their time. Instead, avoid the instinct to engage in the day-to-day dramas that inevitably arise. These can likely be handled by other leaders, allowing you to stay focused on the bigger picture issues that truly advance your school.

"As educators, we're skilled at empowering our students to solve problems on their own — it should be no different with our direct reports."

Doug Lagarde
as Head of Severn School



Related, it can be a challenge not to micromanage your team, but micromanaging is never the answer. Yet many new heads jump in to closely monitor, or worse, actually take over the work of a division head or other leader, which only complicates the problem. If you were most recently a division head or dean yourself, it can be tempting to jump in and tell them how to do the job. You'll feel comfortable and confident doing that, because it's familiar territory. But running a division is not your job, and when you spend time doing that instead of being a head, you'll be missing two opportunities:

- 1. Coaching leaders to become stronger problem solvers and,**
- 2. Focusing on the visioning and leadership work that advances your school.**

Delegating effectively is one of the most important skills of effective heads. If it's uncomfortable for you, get coaching on how to do this well.

Pitfall 3: **Not Seeing That the Honeymoon is Over**

Yes, there's a warm and fuzzy honeymoon during which your Board of Trustees gives you lots of generous accolades and signals that everyone has utter faith in you as a leader. Don't fall for it. At best, only your board chair and the members of the search committee are all in on you.

Your job is to double the number of board supporters you have in your corner as quickly as you can. Find the people who are values and vision-aligned with you and get them to join your booster group. The more people on the board whose rock solid support you can count on, the more effective you'll be, when times are good and when things are more challenging. Don't assume your entire board has your back, make sure you cultivate a core group who actually do.

Pitfall 4: **Not Building Trust Quickly Enough With Faculty**

There's no group more critical to your success than your faculty. And whether they were fans or not of the previous head, they will be skeptical of you. So building their trust quickly is a must.

While it might be tempting to tell them your great ideas on how to improve the curriculum, your job now is to signal your sincere respect for their expertise. (And if you don't have that sincere respect, cultivate that quickly. Being inauthentic will not be constructive.) Sit in on classes, watch, ask questions, but don't offer opinions early on. Do be in listening mode when it comes to your faculty. It's natural to want to contribute, especially if you're an educator, but listening and learning now will serve you later.

Pitfall 5: Carrying Leadership Team Baggage

While you may be the new kid on the administrative leadership team, they are now YOUR team, so setting a new and positive dynamic right away is a must. Failing to do so will cause you to inherit, rather than build, the team culture that serves your vision for the future.

Be clear about how you want the team to function. It doesn't have to be heavy handed, but be clear on your expectations for how you'll work with them, how you'll spend time together, and how you expect them to collaborate.

Don't be surprised if imposter syndrome creeps in from time to time: **Feeling like you don't have what it takes to do the job might happen occasionally.** Though there may be daunting moments, remember that you were not selected on a whim. You were closely vetted, with both you and your board believing you're ready for this job. You don't have to be perfect, and you can get coaching for any skills or experience you'd like to strengthen. You've got this!

Pitfall 6: Steering Clear of Students

With so much visioning and leadership work to do, it might be necessary to spend much of your time in your office, in meetings with colleagues, or visiting with Trustees and donors. But your students are the reason everyone is excited

to be there. The last thing you want to do is make students feel they don't know you. Or worse, that they don't like you (because they never see you. And when they do, you don't know their names).

When Katherine Dinh started as the new head of Marin Country Day School, she made it her goal to know the name of every student from kindergarten to 8th grade by October. She had lunch with them, helped with carpool, swung them in the playground, and attended plays and sporting events.

Knowing your students, and helping them know you, is a powerful demonstration of what you value, and will help you connect more meaningfully with your entire community. Don't skip this or wait until it's too late to make a human connection with the students—it sets the tone for your tenure that will cascade throughout the community.



Pitfall 7: Avoiding Long-Tenured Families

Families with longer tenure might be more skeptical of a new head. Avoid the tendency to just bide time until they cycle out. Instead, commit to winning them over and getting them excited about your vision.

These relationships are worth cultivating because this group will be your closest-in alumni families. That's important for your school's brand (reputation) and for your current and future development efforts. Now's your chance to invest in a good relationship with them as the important current stakeholders and future alumni they are.

"I encourage my clients to let people know what kind of a leader you are right away."

Jennie Winton
Founding Partner & Impact Coach



Pitfall 8: Taking Better Care of Your School Than Yourself

Being a head is demanding emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Early mornings capped with faculty and family evenings can leave you exhausted. Challenging conversations with staff and parents can deplete you emotionally.

Finding balance and taking time for yourself to completely unplug is a must. This is easier said than done so having a coach will help you identify the best way to set and keep healthy boundaries, ultimately improving your effectiveness. Don't imagine this is something you can start later. Set a tone now for how and when you'll be unavailable, and be open and transparent about why. This will serve you as a leader *and* send the message that everyone at your school can and should find healthy balance and support to be their best.

Learn More

[Jennie Winton](#) is a certified coach, the co-founder of strategy firm Mission Minded that has served independent schools for 20 years, an independent school parent, and a believer that you can have more impact and more fun when your values are practically applied in your everyday work.

To explore coaching with Jennie please email Jennie@Mission-Minded.com for a complimentary session. Your conversation will be confidential, and you'll leave more clear and focused on what you want to achieve in your new life as Head of School.

And for support with your school's strategic plan, brand strategy and admissions campaign development visit: <https://mission-minded.com/schools>