NAIS Case Studies
for School Leaders and Boards of Trustees

Contact:
leadership@nais.org
www.nais.org
The Case of the Anonymous Letter
(Original case study developed by Patrick F. Bassett.)

**Cast of Characters** (all names, places, and events are fictionalized)

- **Melvin**, the head of school
- **Mark**, the board chair
Case Study Resources

- To access all the NAIS case study vignettes go to the NAIS website and search for “case studies”: www.nais.org

- For the guidelines that undergird principled decision-making, search on the NAIS website for *Principles of Good Practice*

- For NAIS recommendations on leadership responses to meltdowns or institutional crises, review the slides in the *Appendix* of this presentation or search on the NAIS website for “crisis protocols.”
Case Study Instructions

- Hit the “PAUSE” button on the far left side of the video window for a discussion of the case study.
  - What are the Leadership Issues in play?
  - What are the ethical matters and Principles of Good Practice at stake?

- When finished discussing, hit the “PLAY” button on the video to see NAIS’s “take” on the case (the “PLAY” button and the “PAUSE” button are the same.)

- After you hit the “PLAY” button, the slides will move forward automatically.
Case #29: The Case of the Anonymous Letter

Leadership Issues in Play & Ethical Practices at Stake:

- How does a school head, particularly a new one, prepare the faculty and staff for necessary change and gain buy-in for it?

- Is it ever professional for a faculty, formally or informally, to express displeasure about a head to the board? If not, how does the faculty express dissent? If so, by what appropriate means does faculty opinion get shared?

- What should be the board’s response to an anonymous letter to the board?

- Should the board help the head of school manage a faculty revolt? How can it support the head?
The board should be supportive of the head of school, but the head should manage faculty issues. The head should keep communications open with the board and inform the members of actions he will take to address the situation. The board chair should communicate to the faculty — through a letter the head reads to the faculty — that an anonymous letter has been received, that the board’s practice is not to respond to anonymous letters publicly, and that its policy is to redirect faculty dissent to appropriate channels, i.e. the administration of the school.

The head also needs to maintain open communication with the faculty and should encourage different methods of feedback. He or she should acknowledge the rough spots that occur whenever change is implemented but condemn communications via anonymous letters and the boundary-crossing of complaints to the board.
Case #29: The Case of the Anonymous Letter

NAIS’s Take on the Leadership Issues in Play & PGPs at Stake

- If the head has personal or personnel issues with particular faculty members, the head and the administrative team need to work through these issues. NAIS believes that faculty performance criteria should include “good attitude,” and that “good attitude” includes support for the leadership of the school.

- The board should work proactively with the head to cultivate good relations with faculty and other school constituents.

- It is important that the formal evaluation program for the head of school include managing and communicating with faculty.

- Administering annually or biannually the NAIS “customer satisfaction survey” can produce data for the board to see how all constituencies (including the faculty and staff) are viewing the school, its programs, its leadership (board and administration) and the faculty.
PGPs in “About NAIS” at www.nais.org

Case studies on the NAIS Website:
Do a search for “case studies” for scores of case studies on leadership and governance topics.

Principles of Good Practice on the NAIS Website:
Go to About NAIS to download a PDF (free) or to Publications to order the print version.
Appendix:

NAIS Crisis Protocols

www.nais.org
For routine conundrums and issues:

- Apply the Myers-Briggs “Z”-analysis, examining all four points of the picture: facts, intuitive reactions, logical options, and downstream impact.

1. **Investigate and gather the facts.** One person’s impassioned “report” does not necessarily constitute an emergency or crisis, especially if the “facts” are distorted by that person’s emotions or biases. Before taking any action, gather the data. Determine if any of the NAIS Principles of Good Practice come into play: i.e., are there ethical issues at stake? Are we compromising any principles?

2. **Pay attention to the instinctive “blink” reactions,** since many others will have those same reactions. Assemble the administrative team to relay the facts and seek the “wisdom of the crowd.”

Adapted from The Zig-Zag Process for Problem Solving, pages 161-163, People Types and Tiger Stripes, 3rd edition, 1993, by Gordon D. Lawrence. Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of Psychological Type.
For routine conundrums and issues:

3. **Rationally determine the options** you have. Recognize that conundrums often present what the Institute for Global Ethics (www.globalethics.org) calls “right vs. right” decisions that are resolved only by having and articulating the ethical principles on which you make judgments (e.g., “universal principles,” vs. “greatest good” vs. “caring” ethic). Apply the “four-way” test: 1) gut-check test; 2) *The New York Times* front page test; 3) legal test; 4) role-model test.

4. **Consider the “downstream” impact** of the possible decision, and how it will play out in the community. Test the water, if possible, with some key constituents.

*Adapted from The Zig-Zag Process for Problem Solving, pages 161-163, People Types and Tiger Stripes, 3rd edition, 1993 by Gordon D. Lawrence. Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of Psychological Type.*
Myers-Briggs Z+2 Model
I/E (introvert/extrovert); S/N (sensing/intuition); T/F (thinking/feeling); J/P (judging/perceiving)
Adapted from The Zig-Zag Process for Problem Solving, pages 161-163, People Types and Tiger Stripes, 3rd edition, 1993, by Gordon D. Lawrence. Gainesville, FL: Center for Applications of Psychological Type.

S (Sensing): What problem are we trying to solve? What are the facts, details, frequency?

How do you process info?

N (Intuition): What are the patterns and theories for why this might be happening? How do we brainstorm solutions?

T (Thinking): What are the criteria by which we should make this decision? What is the logical way to address the problem?

How do you make decisions?

F (Feeling): What is the impact on people? How can we deliver this info in the best way to get results?
For “crises” with public relations meltdown implications, take these additional steps:

- **Contact your school's legal counsel and your school’s communications counsel**, if the situation has an external, public and legal dimension (i.e. may be reported in the press, may result in litigation), since the advice from both the legal and communications perspectives is critical (and sometimes conflicting). Also contact NAIS for its professional legal and communications counsel: leadership@nais.org.

- **Alert the board chair of the crisis**, noting the plan of action and possible outcomes. Indicate that the head may ask for the Exec Committee or board to assemble to get advance notice of the facts and to share how the administration intends to address the crisis, seeking board confirmation and support or, absent that, suggestions for alternate plans.
For “crises” with public relations meltdown implications, take these additional steps:

- **Contract with professional communications counsel** to craft a letter to the community. (NAIS has a professional on retainer to help our schools in such situations.)

- **Declare a single point person and spokesperson** for the school (typically the head of school, division head, or communications director).

- **Call in any chits**: with your friends, your supporters, and your God.
Learn from the event: When the dust settles, **debrief the crisis and the school's response**, with the admin team first, then with the board, if appropriate.

- Ask what worked and what didn't, and how the situation may be improved should it happen again.

- Think about what systemic, long-term solutions may be put in place as a result of the lessons learned.

- Determine what strategic and generative conversations within the admin team or with the board might be productive.
To prepare before a crisis occurs:

- One of the best methods of training leadership (in this case, the leadership team and the board of an independent school) is the case study approach. NAIS has on its website (search for “case study”) scores of “real” crises that have occurred in our schools. We recommend routinely introducing a case study at the admin team meeting or at the board meeting, to “practice in advance” appropriate responses were something similar to happen at your school. NAIS might add that some, if not all, of these case studies are likely to happen at one’s school, sooner or later.
The End