

(Editorial note: This case is written from the perspective of the reality that most new heads of international schools rise from either teaching positions or middle management positions of such schools. It is common for their entry into the field of chief school officer to begin in a small school in remote locations. This case is intended for the aspiring or neophyte small international school heads.)

A Chronicle of a Death Foretold (with apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez)

Harriet Rider had been a successful high school English and Social Studies teacher both in a US public school district and for the past five years as such in a large international school. She had become chair of her department, and even served for a semester as assistant principal during the incapacity of the incumbent who returned to the position. Harriet aspired to be a principal, having completed a masters degree in school administration and intermittent courses and workshops in special programs for international school leaders.

Her papers were filed with several agencies that specialize in the placement of administrators for international schools. She agreed to be listed with a small school in the Southern Hemisphere, was surprised to be 'short listed,' handled her on-site interview with the board and community groups brilliantly with her command of language and her professional demeanor, and was offered the job. Although she had never worked in a small school before, this one had an enrollment K-12 of about 300, almost all from the expatriate community, Harriet really wanted to get into the international administration business and this was her only chance at the time. Although she received much information about the school, its curriculum, its faculty, and its student body, she read these only perfunctorily, sufficient to give her the background to be able to respond to questions about community needs, were they to arise. She was concerned that the small numbers of students per grade would be a challenge to implementing flexibility in course offerings in the curriculum.

Actually, the interview was unusual in one aspect, particularly with the board. Much of it was dedicated to what the board felt it wanted its new head of school to do. Harriet tried to take notes. However, as she reviewed them later what she had written was so general that she wondered had she missed something specific to which she could dedicate her first year on the job. Even the private dinner at the home of the board chair with his family was spent in general conversation, mostly about the politics of the local government and financial conditions.

She did take time to read, with little admiration, the nondescript mission statement of the school:

To provide an English language education to students from kindergarten to grade 12 in a secure environment meeting the unique needs of each, regardless of ability, gender, race, nationality or religion, to assure the inculcation of a desire for life-long learning, and an appreciation of and respect for all others regardless of family origins or beliefs.

Harriet had come from a family of academics, had been an honor student all the way through school, attended a prestigious university, and had achieved unusual success in her teaching of advanced classes, including much work with school literary journals, community service clubs, and other activities that involved students out of class time. She considered her forte to be working with highly motivated achievers who sought the challenge of an intellectual approach.

She knew this small school couldn't have too many of this type of student. However, her thought process rationalizations were two fold. First, her real task was to bring this intellectual challenge to her staff of teachers, not solely to students. Second, this was a necessary starting point in a career that would open the door to her next position of a larger international school, perhaps even one among the largest and well-known in the world.

She arrived on the scene, met with the staff in personal interviews, to find a rude reality check. Most of her private conversations with faculty indicated the good work they were doing with the many students who had special needs from Autism, to Down Syndrome, to students who were below grade level expectation in some academic aspect. Almost no teacher offered any information about how average or above-average students were doing. Harriet hid her reaction when she asked one middle school teacher, "Do you have some high achievers?" and was told, "Oh, yes, but they are highly motivated and really can fend for themselves. And we have the very active extracurricular program to enrich them!"

Harriet felt that her ambitions could not be realized simply by doing a good job of keeping the school as it is and was. Her dreams included building a more rigorous academic program, expanding the curriculum to not only new course offerings but those that encouraged students to pursue an honors-type program, and, above all, in her knowledge of the reality both of cost effectiveness and necessary student population to be able to offer a diversified course array, growing the enrollment to double – or more – its current size.

After three months on the job, having gotten to know the 'power structure' of the school and its community, and having established herself and her reputation as a competent, accessible, professional manager who solves both systemic and personal problems, she made her first move.

She had been meeting with Fred Bowman, board chair, every week for an hour or so to share thoughts, respond to questions, discuss needs, and generally just exchange ideas on any topic either of them wished to pursue. Fred had indicated the board's satisfaction and praise of her work, repeatedly offering to assist in any way that Harriet would indicate. After these three months, Harriet felt the time was right to make some suggestions about school development.

She mentioned the need to expand enrollment, to do something about more flexible offerings at all grade levels to provide for students who were academically talented, and to somehow change the reputation of the school in the community that it was a school that did a great job only for those students who had very special needs at only one end of the ability spectrum. She indicated that a plan could be undertaken to expand enrollment by attracting other English-speaking applicants in the local community who were attending other schools, including host country schools. She indicated how the adequate land the school had that was now being unused could be developed into a state-of-the-art campus. The mission could be expanded and better drawn to project an image of a school that with all its other benefits would also be an academic challenge to the most talented in its student body. She suggested the board form a 'development committee,' or perhaps call it 'long-range' or 'strategic planning' to study her suggestions to determine their viability and applicability.

Fred, who usually bantered back and forth during their weekly conversations, sat very still during Harriet's rather long presentation without interrupting. When she ended, he looked away from her, commented that her thoughts were very interesting and useful, but that he felt that the community wasn't ready at this time for such moves. The community wanted a school that was small, with a "family-type atmosphere," as he put it, that would be lost in growth. The board and the community were proud of what Harriet, her predecessors and her staff had done for the many students with challenging needs. This is what they wanted from their school and she was providing it at a high level. "Harriet," he ended, "I admire your ambition and your talents. But what you want isn't going to happen in this community. You weren't retained to do this. Please continue to do the fine work you have begun. Don't occupy yourself with the kind of modifications that can never be."

The meeting ended on an amicable note marking the date for their next personal encounter with a discussion of whether locally retained staff can have their talents developed through on-line or on-campus courses to provide the special programs that so far required the costly recruitment of expatriate staff to administer.

Among all her talents, Harriet was nothing if not ambitious. She wasn't about to take one 'no' as a definitive answer to what she wished to accomplish. Later that week, she called in three 'key' senior faculty whose opinions she came to value highly, to discuss this same theme. Their response, in summary, given with respect and admiration all

had for her intellect and her empathetic approach to all with whom she came in contact, was, "Harriet, we have a full load now in this small school, with multiple preparations, the widest range of student abilities – or lack thereof – in our classes. We really have no time to work on something like this. Anyway, we like the way things are and so do the parents in our small international school family. It ain't broke! Don't fix it!"

'Someone out there must feel as I do,' thought Harriet, 'I just have to find them to get this ball rolling!' She next went to a board member, Susan Tate, with whom she had developed in a short time after her arrival a wonderful social relationship based upon their common literary interests. She told Susan that she had spoken to Fred about this and his cool reception. Susan had two children in school, one older who was hoping to attend a university in the US with the most competitive admissions standards, and one younger with special needs. Harriet immediately felt that Susan was struggling to be the culminate diplomat in her response, in no way risking endangering their sound social relationship. Susan's words were to the effect, "Great idea, talk more with Fred, try to convince him, my kids are very happy with the program they are receiving, the school (we) really is giving them the program they need, they love going off in the morning, and staying at school all day, too, I'm not sure we should risk changing things, in this remote environment the happiness and connectedness of our kids is paramount, etc."

One more try with a key communicator among the high school parents who had gone out of her way to visit with Harriet shortly after her arrival to welcome her to the community, offering her assistance with anything Harriet needed to settle in, where to shop, where to get her car fixed, how to speed up mail delivery, all the little techniques one needs to adapt to a new environment. Betty Lowman also was the mother of perhaps the highest achieving student in the high school. Harriet invited Betty to her office for a personal chat, putting her at ease that it had nothing to do with her child, and then presenting the ideas she had expounded to Fred a few days before. Betty seemed somewhat lost as to why Harriet was asking her advice about this. Her child would graduate before any of the programs Harriet envisioned could ever reach reality. She, too, said as did Susan, that the academic level may not be the best among international schools, but that it was more than adequate for a small remote school. Kids were happy, spirited, connected to each other and to the school. A great school culture and climate existed among kids, teachers and parents. Maybe Harriet was being too ambitious. Relax and wait awhile and maybe things may change. Anyway, wasn't this in the domain of the board? Maybe Harriet should start there, etc.

The bombshell exploded a week later in Harriet's office when Fred asked for an earlier meeting than they had planned the last time they met.

"Harriet, I appreciate what you want to do," Fred began sternly, "but I'm not sure I appreciate how you are doing it. I know this is your first time as the head of a school,

as a chief officer. But you are still responsible to me, and to my board. When we had the discussion about your ideas I thought I gave you ample reason why this wasn't the right time for your suggestions. This is a very small community and word gets around quickly. Now I hear from all sorts of people that you are pushing your ideas in an attempt to 'get around me.' I don't appreciate that, and I don't need the pressure your methods have generated. You are doing a great job running the school. I don't want anything to come between that, your job, and the good relationship you have with the board. So I ask you, please, no, I am telling you, forget this idea of growth of any aspect of our school's mission, except that which we already have, What you have pursued has created a divisiveness in our community we haven't had before. We don't need this!"

Notes to those who conduct case analysis;

1. Analysts should not be permitted to change facts presented or to insert new ones to make the case more amenable to analysis.
2. If desired aspects appear to have been omitted, most likely it was done premeditatedly by the case writer to encourage certain types of thought in the analysis.
3. It is not an oversight that Harriet mentioned to Susan Tate, board member, that she had previously spoken to Fred Bowman, board chair, about her desires but did not mention this to the three key faculty, nor to Betty Lowman, her friend.
4. The description of Harriet Rider's background and subsequent thought processes are a required part to understand and analyze the genesis of the outcomes – and projected future – of the case and of those involved.
5. Often, case writers provide 'questions for analysis' to aid the reader in focusing on aspects of the case. These are not provided here. If it so desired, this can be done although it is hoped by the case writer that those who read and are responsible for analysis will have sufficient background to develop more meaningful questions than the case writer may provide.