

Navigating Culture & Change After a Longstanding Administration

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Franklin Academy

This retrospective case study explores the leadership transition at Franklin Academy, a college preparatory boarding school in Connecticut serving neurodivergent students, following an extended period of founder-led administration. Confronted with founder's syndrome, fiscal instability, and organizational stagnation, the Board of Trustees initiated a structured leadership change grounded in research-based change management strategies. The transition applied Kotter's (1996) eight-stage model and Bolman and Deal's (2017) structural, human resource, and symbolic frameworks to support institutional transformation. New leadership emphasized transparency, coaching, and distributed leadership to address staff morale, student retention, and stakeholder engagement. Coaching and mentoring relationships, informed by transformational leadership theory and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), fostered professional trust and positioned staff as active participants in organizational change. The first year of implementation demonstrated improvements in student and faculty retention, enrollment, and advancement outcomes. This case provides a model for other mission-driven schools navigating leadership succession and cultural renewal.

Keywords: Coaching, founder's syndrome, independent schools, LMX theory, transformational leadership,

Introduction

Franklin Academy (Connecticut) is a private 8-12 boarding school serving students with autism spectrum disorders and other related neurodevelopmental disabilities. Founded in 2002, Franklin Academy is one of the first college preparatory schools for students with nonverbal learning disorders and Asperger syndrome, later diagnosed as autism spectrum disorders. Franklin Academy went through various iterations of a mission statement over fifteen years. However, the consistent focus was to simultaneously provide students with an academically rigorous experience with a focus on mastering the independent living and social skills necessary to enter various post-secondary environments. Franklin Academy is a privately funded and accredited institution (NEASC) and does not receive federal or state funds.

For years, the school was co-led by its founding leadership team, whose vision shaped the institution's core identity and practices. However, like many mission-driven organizations, Franklin Academy eventually faced a confluence of challenges associated with "founder syndrome"—including insularity, fiscal instability, staff burnout, and inconsistent enrollment. These internal struggles were compounded by larger external forces: mounting pressures in the independent school market, increasing scrutiny over out-of-district placement costs, and evolving expectations from families and funding bodies.

Recognizing that the school's sustainability

was at risk, the Board of Trustees initiated a carefully structured transition to new leadership. This case study explores that pivotal moment of transformation—how Franklin Academy moved from an organic, personality-driven model to a more intentional, strategically-managed organization. Drawing from data collected at the onset of change, the study examines the first year of new leadership and the institutional shifts undertaken to improve student retention, financial oversight, staff morale, and parent engagement.

This retrospective case study examines how Franklin Academy, a college preparatory boarding school serving neurodivergent students in Connecticut, approached leadership succession following a long period of founder-driven administration. Drawing on Kotter's (1996) stages of organizational change and Bolman and Deal's (2017) structural, human resource, and symbolic frameworks, the transition was shaped by deliberate efforts to increase transparency, stabilize morale, and reorient governance. Central to this process was the integration of coaching and mentoring practices, informed by transformational leadership theory and developmental coaching models (Avolio & Bass, 2004; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). By fostering reflective supervision, goal-oriented dialogue, and professional trust, the new leadership team positioned staff not as passive recipients of change but as active contributors to institutional redesign. Through intentional mentoring relationships and distributed leadership structures, the school cultivated a culture of shared purpose that improved retention, increased

enrollment, and revitalized advancement efforts. This case illustrates how schools undergoing transition after long-standing leadership can use structured coaching methods to develop internal capacity, reduce resistance, and promote lasting cultural renewal.

Literature Review

Founder's Syndrome

Founder's syndrome refers to the organizational challenges that arise when a single individual, typically the founder, holds disproportionate influence over an institution's culture, direction, and operations. In the context of independent schools, founding heads often leave a lasting imprint on governance practices, community expectations, and even pedagogical frameworks. Over time, this centralization of influence can limit institutional flexibility and complicate planning for future growth (Block & Rosenberg, 2002; Murray & Harrison, 2017). The school's identity becomes closely linked to the founder's presence, making the eventual transition to new leadership particularly delicate and, at times, destabilizing. When a new head of school assumes leadership after a long-serving or founding administrator, they often inherit more than just operational responsibilities; they step into a tightly woven cultural narrative. Davis, Chatterjee, and Hecht (2016) highlight how successors may face resistance rooted in loyalty to the founder's legacy, compounded by unspoken norms that prioritize tradition over adaptation. In tightly knit educational environments, even well-intentioned changes can be perceived as threats to the founder's vision. Karjalainen (2017) emphasizes how an overidentification with the founder's persona can hinder collaboration and restrict the community's ability to evolve, especially if governance structures were designed to support a singular leadership style.

For independent schools to thrive beyond their founding era, intentional recalibration is essential. This often involves redefining the institution's mission as a shared endeavor, investing in leadership structures that promote collective responsibility, and encouraging reflection at every level of the organization (Block & Rosenberg, 2002). Spears (2017) and others argue that successful transitions require both structural and cultural shifts; board development, community engagement, and a clear articulation of values that extend beyond the founder's narrative are all critical. Without this groundwork, schools risk stagnation or internal conflict, particularly if new leaders are expected to uphold the past without room to chart a future.

Change Management Theory

Change management theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how schools navigate leadership transitions, particularly when

long-serving administrators depart. Kotter's (1996) model remains one of the most widely referenced in organizational literature, offering eight sequential steps that emphasize urgency, coalition-building, clear communication, and visible early progress.

Within the context of schools, this model has been adapted to recognize the relational and values-based nature of educational institutions, where the success of a leadership transition often depends less on procedural changes and more on the leader's ability to build trust and foster shared purpose (Fullan, 2007). Research underscores that effective change efforts hinge on early stakeholder engagement, transparent messaging, and a willingness to adjust strategies in response to community feedback (Arar & Abu-Romi, 2016). These approaches are particularly relevant when a school must recalibrate after the departure of a figure who has shaped its identity and operations over many years.

Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model further enriches the literature on educational change, offering Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic perspectives to guide institutional transformation. Of particular relevance during administrative transitions are the Structural, Human Resource, and Symbolic Frames. The Structural Frame helps schools evaluate their internal processes, governance structures, and decision-making channels. The Human Resource Frame emphasizes the importance of staff morale, professional development, and relational capital, which are often tested during times of uncertainty. The Symbolic Frame focuses on the rituals, traditions, and cultural narratives that define a school community. These elements can either reinforce or undermine change efforts, depending on how they are acknowledged and incorporated into the transition process (Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016). Literature consistently shows that leaders who draw on multiple perspectives, especially those that attend to both institutional systems and emotional undercurrents, are better positioned to lead schools through sustainable transformation.

Methods: Case Analysis

The Transitional Year: Leadership Member Exchange

During the year preceding the formal leadership transition at Franklin Academy, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory served as a valuable framework for mentoring senior staff and fostering partnership amid significant structural changes. LMX theory posits that the quality of relationships between leaders and their direct reports affects communication, trust, and role clarity, which are critical during periods of uncertainty (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014). Confronted with the need to eliminate nine positions, amounting to a 15 percent reduction in personnel, leadership prioritized open communication and transparency to address staff concerns and reduce resistance

(Lines, 2004). Previous organizational analysis revealed fragmented decision-making and siloed senior staff operating with limited coordination, resulting in ambiguous roles and inefficiencies (Bolman & Deal, 2017). By engaging senior leaders in candid discussions about institutional challenges and restructuring plans, the administration sought to clarify expectations and build trust through consistent mentoring conversations (Liden et al., 2006). The consolidation of middle management into three distinct divisions was accompanied by intentional coaching designed to empower these leaders as change agents responsible for guiding their teams through altered roles and responsibilities. Research demonstrates that such dyadic mentoring relationships improve role performance and foster organizational commitment, particularly when leaders model transparent decision-making and solicit input from staff (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007). This approach cultivated a culture of shared accountability and enabled middle managers to navigate complex changes with greater confidence, supporting the broader institutional realignment necessary for the school's sustainability.

Radical Transparency & Institutional Education

The implementation of radical transparency at Franklin Academy emerged as a cornerstone of transformational leadership during a pivotal period of administrative transition. Drawing on the work of Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership is grounded in the ability to inspire shared vision, intellectually stimulate staff, and develop leadership capacity across the organization. To replace a legacy culture of siloed communication and top-down authority, the new administration deliberately shifted the traditional model of faculty meetings toward “community forums” centered on institutional learning. These gatherings provided opportunities to explore topics such as budgetary constraints, cash flow trends, and enrollment management strategies, thus fostering a shared understanding of the school's operational landscape and strategic priorities. By equipping staff with insight into both fiscal and programmatic decision-making, the administration cultivated a sense of ownership and alignment with long-term institutional goals. Central to this process was a coaching model that emphasized distributed leadership and voice. Senior leaders were tasked with presenting throughout the year, demystifying governance and modeling decision logic for the broader community. This deliberate approach to leadership development challenged the perception of a single executive voice and instead positioned senior team members as active agents in cultural transformation. Through structured debriefs following Board of Trustees meetings, facilitated think-alouds on critical decisions, and cross-departmental dialogues, leadership created transparent mentorship structures that guided staff through both the “why” and “how” of

institutional change. As Bass and Riggio (2006) note, transformational leaders engage followers by aligning individual and organizational values, a dynamic made tangible through these collaborative and reflective processes.

The shift in leadership structure also extended to institutional practices that supported professional growth and shared governance. New initiatives emerged, including a faculty-led hiring committee, expanded summer leadership roles, and the formation of task forces charged with identifying ongoing professional development needs. These initiatives intentionally elevated middle management as catalysts of innovation and implementation. Through regular stakeholder surveys, drop-in feedback sessions with the Head of School, and iterative restructuring, the leadership team was able to reduce the size of middle management to seven clearly defined roles while simultaneously increasing the number of staff working directly with students and families. These adjustments responded directly to themes from staff input and aligned institutional resources with its mission of personalized education.

This multi-pronged strategy advanced key tenets of transformational leadership by promoting intellectual engagement, modeling ethical governance, and fostering individualized consideration for professional development. By embedding transparency within both structural and relational dimensions of leadership, the school shifted from a culture of guarded authority to one of participatory strategy. Coaching and mentoring were not abstract ideals but embedded within institutional practice, accelerating leadership capacity and fostering a more resilient, adaptable school culture.

Outcomes and Impact

One year into the leadership transition at Franklin Academy, the institution has realized measurable improvements across key operational and cultural indicators. These results reflect the intentional application of transformational leadership principles (Bass & Riggio, 2006), alongside strategic structural alignment and mentoring efforts designed to build institutional trust, strengthen governance, and enhance overall school performance. Rooted in a vision of radical transparency and collective leadership development, the outcomes suggest not only successful change implementation but also growing organizational capacity for sustainability and innovation.

Quantitative indicators demonstrate progress across enrollment, retention, and staffing. The school achieved its highest student retention rate in a decade, with 84 percent of students returning compared to a prior ten-year average of 72 percent. Enrollment figures also surpassed historical trends, with 17 new students enrolling for the academic year, representing a substantial increase above the typical intake. Faculty retention reached 95 percent, with all teaching staff choosing to return following

the transition, signaling improved morale, clarity in role expectations, and renewed alignment with institutional values. These indicators reflect the efficacy of data-informed staffing realignments and the emphasis on distributed leadership and mentorship across middle management (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Significant strides were also made in the areas of advancement and donor stewardship. The school exceeded its annual fundraising goal by 15 percent, breaking prior institutional records. Equally noteworthy was the breadth of internal donor participation: 100 percent of board members, 100 percent of senior leadership, and 83 percent of faculty and staff contributed to the advancement campaign. These figures underscore a renewed sense of institutional alignment and confidence in the school's strategic direction. As Kouzes and Posner (2017) highlight, shared vision and credible leadership are central to inspiring commitment across stakeholder groups—a dynamic made visible in these philanthropic outcomes.

These achievements were not incidental but the result of deliberate, research-informed strategies. Leadership applied Bolman and Deal's (2021) Structural and Human Resource Frameworks to reconfigure institutional systems, streamline management roles, and embed stakeholder input into decision-making processes. Simultaneously, mentoring and coaching practices, informed by Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), allowed senior staff to model inclusive leadership and build shared understanding around operational challenges and solutions. The creation of community forums, task forces, and internal presentations functioned not only as platforms for information sharing but also as developmental structures for future leaders.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the first year of leadership transformation at Franklin Academy reflects the complexity of navigating founder's syndrome, a dynamic in which long-standing leadership and informal authority obstruct necessary organizational change (Block and Rosenberg, 2002). As the school shifted from a leadership model centered on individual influence to one built on systems, shared governance, and institutional accountability, principles of organizational change theory offered essential guidance. Kotter's (1996) eight-stage process provided a framework for addressing urgency, fostering collective ownership, and securing early indicators of progress. These efforts were further supported by mentoring relationships shaped through Leader Member Exchange theory, which emphasized the development of trust and mutual influence between senior leaders and emerging administrators (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Transformational leadership practices, particularly those that encouraged vision sharing, intellectual stimulation, and distributed leadership opportunities, were also central to the cultural reorientation that took place (Bass and

Riggio, 2006). Through this combined application of theory and practice, the institution redefined its internal structures while cultivating a professional culture that supports collaboration, accountability, and long-term sustainability. The case of Franklin Academy demonstrates how intentional mentoring, transparent leadership practices, and research-informed organizational design can reestablish trust, build institutional capacity, and reframe the legacy of founder-driven leadership.

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