What's Happening? vs. This Is What Happens.

Reflections on Framing for the Outgoing Leader

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A year and a half ago, I agreed to become Interim Head of School. I entered the role with clarity, optimism, and a deep sense of responsibility to the community I had served for fifteen years. For the first ten months of that term, I was also a formal candidate, and ultimately a finalist, for the permanent position. Many in the community, including me, believed I would remain in the role long-term.

That initial period was, by nearly every measure, productive and affirming. Together, we completed a significant organizational restructuring, stabilized leadership, and built genuine trust and collaboration across divisions. We advanced fundraising for five capital projects, strengthened operational systems, and generated real momentum. People were aligned. The work felt meaningful.

Then, in October, the Board announced an external hire.

The announcement was unexpected for many, including me, and it landed with real emotional weight across the community. In the weeks that followed, my focus was squarely on stabilizing the school: creating space for faculty and staff to process the change, reinforcing continuity for students and families, and maintaining institutional confidence. I provided that steadiness to the community while privately working through my own shock and disappointment, and my family's.

The initial shock passed within a few weeks. Most faculty and staff found their footing and returned to familiar rhythms. But over time, I began to notice something shifting (slowly, and then significantly) like a tide that comes in unnoticed until it's pulling your beach chair into the water.

As the new semester began, the organization entered what leadership researchers call a liminal state: a period between leadership identities. The emotional shock had worn off for most people, but in its place came something quieter and more complex: uncertainty about authority, subtle shifts in behavior, and the emergence of new organizational patterns.

This phase was not dramatic. It was not malicious. And it was not unique to my school. It followed a pattern that leadership scholars, governance experts, and experienced boards have documented repeatedly.

Understanding the Liminal Phase

In organizational theory, the period after a successor is announced but before the outgoing leader departs is known as a liminal (or neutral) state. William Bridges' influential transition framework draws a useful distinction between *change* (the formal event) and *transition* (the psychological and organizational adjustment that follows). The liminal state occupies the middle of that process, and it is often the most destabilizing.

In schools, this phase typically includes:

• Authority drift: decision-making boundaries become less clear

• Pre-alignment behavior: individuals begin orienting themselves toward future leadership

• Increased experimentation: sometimes experienced as people “going rogue”

• Shortened trust loops: people acting rather than escalating, disrupting the normal flow of information upward

When you're living through it, it feels personal. But it is striking how consistent these patterns are across institutions. What feels personal is actually structural. What feels like disloyalty is usually anxiety. What feels like a loss of control is often an organization attempting to self-stabilize in the face of uncertainty.

In independent schools, where authority is deeply relational and culture carries as much weight as policy, the liminal phase can be especially pronounced.

None of this reflects failure. In many ways, it reflects engagement. People are still moving, still deciding, still trying to do good work. The challenge is that without intentional boundary-setting, momentum fragments and informal power structures fill the void.

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What This Means for the Outgoing Leader

Having lived through this phase with eyes open, I offer these reflections, not as prescriptions, but as guideposts for anyone navigating a similar passage.

1. Name the phase, at least for yourself.

Understanding that you are in a liminal state changes how you interpret behavior. It shifts the internal narrative from *What's happening?* to *This is what happens.* That reframe matters more than it might seem. It creates distance between the structural and the personal, and that distance is what allows you to lead well when leading feels hardest.

2. Redefine your role: don't try to reclaim the old one.

The work of an outgoing leader in this phase is no longer visionary or integrative. It is stabilization, boundary-holding, and dignified closure. That work is quieter and less exciting, but it is still consequential. The institution needs you to do it well, even when it doesn't feel like enough.

3. Clarify decision lanes.

Ambiguity is the accelerant of the liminal phase. Clear, explicit statements about what decisions still rest with current leadership (and which are appropriately deferred) reduce anxiety for everyone and protect the institution from drift.

4. Choose your battles.

Not every deviation requires correction. Some are harmless signals of transition, and overcorrecting them costs more authority than they're worth. Save your standing for moments that challenge mission, affect safety, or jeopardize institutional integrity.

5. Tend to your own sense of loss.

This may be the least discussed aspect of leadership transitions, and one of the most important. Even when handled well, letting go brings grief, especially when the departure was unexpected. Acknowledge it. Don't perform resilience at the expense of honesty with yourself.

The liminal state is not a referendum on your worth as a leader, nor is it a verdict on a community's values. It is a bridge: necessary, temporary, and navigable.

When crossed with clarity, humility, and intention, it can become something more than an ending. It can become a meaningful contribution to what comes next.

That, too, is leadership.