

## 5 MINUTES WITH

## 5 Minutes with Patrick Schuermann

# Leading Outside the Box

*Successful leadership requires knowing your default style and strengthening other approaches to meet each moment most effectively.*



**Patrick J. Schuermann** is the founding director of the Master's in Independent School Leadership program at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College and is a lead faculty member of the NBOA Leadership Academy, among many other leadership and research commitments. He has authored numerous articles, commissioned reports and books on leadership, and won an Emmy Award for Best Educational Piece for his documentary "A Matter of Principals" — a piece that sought to tell the story of effective leadership in a more compelling manner than traditional print form.

**Net Assets:** You direct a number of independent school leadership programs coming out of Vanderbilt University and one offered by NBOA, among other endeavors. What was your path to specializing in independent school leadership?

**Schuermann:** Like many independent school teachers, I found my way into the classroom having majored in a subject area, in my case biology. In my second year of teaching middle school science at Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville, South Carolina, I began a master's program at Furman University. One of my mentors said, "You know enough about your content area. Thinking down the road, why don't you consider a master's in leadership?"

So in my early years of teaching, I worked on a master's in education administration — but I was the only person in the program who didn't work at a public school. It was during our lively graduate school class discussions that I learned just how much context matters. I often found myself doing the work of translating what we were learning from one particular context, in this case public schools, and considering how it would play out in a differently nuanced context, that of an independent school. I carried this practice with me throughout my doctorate at Vanderbilt, where I was given an opportunity to craft leadership development programs uniquely tailored to the independent school context.

While learning from people working in a diversity of school settings offers tremendous value, so do learning experiences that are purposefully focused on the skills needed to thrive as an independent school leader.

**Net Assets:** Your latest book, "Data Fluency," addresses how school leaders can strengthen their communications with effective data visualization. Why did you write that book?

**Schuermann:** After completing my doctorate work, I launched into writing academic articles and books. I hoped they were useful, but sometimes I felt like this work was too far from the specific contexts of leadership, which are so important. So I started making little documentaries that told the stories I wanted to tell in a different way and brought to light examples of leaders making an impact in their own school communities.

That's what led me to writing this book about data fluency, which is really a book to help leaders think about telling their stories visually. We often hear about the importance of data-driven, or better, data-informed leadership. When leaders can inform their school communities about important data in a visually compelling way, it makes us better able to communicate the core issues and inspire momentum for change and growth. We collect so much data, but the trick is, how can we optimally communicate with data? That's key.

If you boil it down to its essence, I contend that leadership is about communication and movement. Leaders engage their communities through an array of modes of communication, to discern where they are and where they want to go. Vision provides direction for the movement. And it's through a combination of ongoing communication and movement that leaders help their community remain on an ever-responsive course of living out its mission.

**Net Assets:** Do you see a difference in leadership styles among different roles in an independent school, for example, heads of school, business officers or enrollment leaders?

**Schuermann:** In the master's program at Vanderbilt, we purposely build each cohort to represent as much diversity of experience as possible; we look for individuals with experiences in the classroom, admissions, advancement and the business office, as well as coaches, deans and heads of school. The participants learn so much from each other's perspectives and different leadership styles.

Intuitively, we might think that certain types of individuals self-select into admissions work or into the business office. And while there may be some small truth to that, the key to growing as a leader is knowing that while you may have a default leadership style and comfort zone, you must learn to master different approaches in response to your environment.

So independent school leaders, whether they be within the classroom or serving as a head of school or operating in the business office or admissions office, need to become familiar with many different styles of leadership to be optimally

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## 5 MINUTES WITH continued

effective. What we come to realize is that there's a time and place for democratic leadership, for a more authoritative approach, for a pace-setting style, and for a coaching style.

In our master's program and the NBOA Leadership Academy, we are seeking a nuanced understanding of leadership and its influence on school culture. The goal is to better understand how we can leverage different leadership styles and approaches to target very specific aspects of the culture and climate of our community.

**Net Assets:** I hear how you resist putting different groups or roles into boxes and how important it is for all leaders to understand different styles and how they function in a particular context. But would you say that business officers more often identify with one style more than another? And might they in general have room to grow with other particular styles?

**Schuermann:** One of the articles we unpack in the NBOA Leadership Academy focuses on the importance of leaders understanding themselves and others in terms of emotional intelligence. Author Daniel Golman proposes that each leadership style is essentially a unique bundling of the different facets of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. I would contend that these are pretty evenly dispersed across all careers and that individual strengths are variable. And so, my sense is that as a whole, business officers don't necessarily tend to favor one leadership style over another.

The **NBOA Leadership Academy** is a one-year leadership development program designed for a select cohort of independent school business office professionals ready to gain the skills and organizational perspectives necessary to grow and advance as an independent school business leader. Learn more at [nboa.org/learning/leadership-academy](https://nboa.org/learning/leadership-academy).

With that said, another tool that we use in the academy to learn more about ourselves — which is a key part of becoming an impactful leader — is a “four

frames” assessment, originally proposed by Lee Bolman and Terry Deal. For each question, you rank four possible responses, and then the answers together tell you the predominant “frame” that you use to see the world. The frames are structural, political, human resources and symbolic.

Business officers, by nature of their work, have to be very detail oriented. They have to be able to quantify and deal with information with a lot of skill and precision. This work lends itself to folks who can operate well within a structural frame. And you might see admissions professionals, who are directly interacting with other people intensively, cluster around the human resources frame. But this certainly isn't to say that you won't find some of the most outgoing, gregarious, HR-oriented business officers and others who are just wonderful in the symbolic or political realms.

As students of leadership, we want to become aware of our go-to leadership styles and our predominant frames, and then cultivate our capacity in other areas, as well as build teams around us that have complimentary sets of go-to styles and frames.

**Net Assets:** Again, the best answer to this question is likely context-specific, but in general, where do you see business officers making the most impact in terms of independent school leadership?

**Schuermann:** I see business officers as increasingly invaluable members of leadership teams. In a way, it goes back to the question you asked earlier about the book on data visualization. The reality is that we're in a finite world where resources are limited, and in some ways, we're feeling pressure to do more with less. Within that context, business officers really help us understand the important tradeoffs that we will need to make as we seek to live out our missions. We need individuals who can pull the right data together to inform our strategic and operational decisions. Business officers help us refine our vision around our mission by helping us understand the reality of the resources that we can leverage in support of our work.

Business officers play a crucial role by informing leadership teams and boards about where we are and then explaining our options on the way forward as we think

about our goals. It's so important to have a thoughtful, strategic plan, but a strategic plan without the resources aligned with it is just a wish list. Business officers help us ensure that we are aligning all of our resources in the most thoughtful, effective way to move us in the direction of our strategic priorities and our missions and our visions.

**Net Assets:** What might you say about the relationship between the head of school and business officer in accomplishing a school's goals and priorities?

**Schuermann:** It's interesting that as you look at leadership models across different types of institutions, you often have a leader who is internally focused and another who is externally focused. At universities, for example, you have a president and also a provost.

Within K-12 independent schools, what we have is a beautiful partnership between heads of schools and business officers, who are both looking within and out on the horizon. Transformative school leadership requires teams of people standing together, shoulder to shoulder, with the discipline to look holistically at the balance sheet, and the mission of the school, and the tremendous array of human resources and parent resources and student resources, and ultimately the strategic vision and direction of the school. When the head and business officer approach this important work side-by-side, they set their school community up to thrive. I think this partnership is a real strength of the K-12 independent school model. Heads and business officers each have their deep expertise and distinct responsibilities, but there is a common commitment and a shared vision. It's a winning combination. **N**

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