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# Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership – Part 1 of 5

Josh Bowar

September 16, 2021

Leading is hard. Leading during an unforeseen crisis is even harder. Six weeks into my first year as head of school at Sioux Center Christian School, the entire school, along with most of the community of Sioux Center, was shaken to the core by a sexual abuse scandal involving one of our teachers and many of his students. At some point during the first 48 hours of this crisis, I realized that this situation would change both my school and who I am as a leader forever. For the past four years, we've been picking up the pieces, doing our best to stay on the path of healing.

Then, 2020 happened. Another unforeseen crisis. Another leadership crucible that demanded so much attention and energy. If someone would have told me in graduate school, "Josh, someday you are going to lead an entire school community through a scandal *and* a pandemic during your first four years of school leadership," I would have first laughed, and then I would have changed programs!

Of course, no one can predict the crises through which they'll have to lead, but any experienced leader will tell you that a crisis is inevitable. Never *if*, always *when*.

Moments of crisis make or unmake a leader and the community they are charged with the privilege to lead. Leading a school during a crisis is one of the hardest things I have ever done, and I am not alone. After talking to many Christian school leaders across the country, everyone agrees: leading through the COVID-19 pandemic the last 12-18 months has been the hardest season of their leadership, and most felt utterly overwhelmed and unprepared.

Observing fellow Christian school leaders and experiencing crisis myself instilled in me a desire to answer this question: What does it take for a Christian school leader to lead well during an unexpected crisis—not just to survive the moment, but to lead in a way that allows the whole community to be transformed into something much brighter, much more aligned with God's purposes during dark times?

To discover an answer, I interviewed school leaders in Christian education: heads of school, principals, and other administrators at 12 schools scattered throughout the United States. The discussions were guided by these questions:

- What are the common ways individuals struggle in their leadership during a crisis within the context of Christian education (K-12)?
- What are the key attributes a leader needs to have/cultivate to successfully navigate through a crisis within the context of Christian education (K-12)?
- What tools or skills consistently help leaders as they lead through a crisis?

Through my research, I have come to believe that every crisis reveals character, competence, and conviction. We must see each crisis not as something to white-knuckle our way through but as an invitation to growth and transformation as Christian leaders and school communities.

My research uncovered ten keys that contribute to a leader's ability to lead well through a crisis. In this first post of a five-part series, I will address Keys 1 and 2.

### **KEY 1: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO SEEK OUT CRISIS-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP TRAINING.**

All school leaders will be on the front lines of a crisis, with people looking to them for guidance. Schools should invest now in the development of their leaders to be prepared when the inevitable crisis comes in order to respond with clear-eyed realism and unparalleled hope.

Crisis-focused leadership training involves understanding the context of any crisis. In 2020, the developing context for most schools was a highly charged political atmosphere combined with varying opinions regarding COVID-19 mitigation. This context added complexity to the Christian school leader's navigation of the crisis.

As one leader shared, "I feel a pressure to keep everyone happy on topics that there won't be agreement on. Staff and parents [who] have political differences make it hard. That has weighed on me and made me feel weary." Another leader shared about the politically charged atmosphere of schools: "This has been the hardest time in my life professionally and personally. People are making personal attacks, calling me a communist because I was letting Chinese students stay at the school during COVID-19." One more leader included, "I feel like I am always on a very thin line between sides and trying to make sure the needs of all the constituents are met in an environment where simply meeting one person's needs might make another person feel angry."

School leaders expressed varying levels of readiness and confidence in managing crisis. What they *did* have was a deep desire to care for people, with one sharing, "The leadership role is a shepherding role for a community of believers. . . . I need to be doing . . . the day-to-day operations and systems. But what are the spiritual growth components of staff, faculty, and students, and even donors? There are a lot of people who need extra support." One more leader shared, "I am attending to people's basic human needs. Do they feel loved and cared for and have what they need? There are so many more needs to meet . . . there is no way to meet them. Never before have we had to have so many different approaches to the same situation."

## **KEY 2: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO LEARN AND PRACTICE LEADERSHIP AGILITY TO BETTER RESPOND TO CHANGE.**

Navigating through a crisis often brings about changes, both expected and unexpected. School leaders need to be adept in the change process, comfortable with the messiness of change, and ready to implement processes and tools to manage change toward innovation.

At the start of the pandemic, many Christian schools accelerated the change process and were able to pivot quickly to provide online education. One leader reflected, “The experience has been unifying in that we’ve had to do things we’re not normally comfortable doing.” Another leader shared, “We had to shift our model on a dime. Our teachers became even more trustworthy of leadership and vice versa because we each had to do our jobs well quickly.”

The events of 2020 also helped leaders understand what gets in the way of innovation in their Christian school communities. Here are some of these **roadblocks to growth and change**:

### **Clinging to Tradition**

Overwhelmingly, a focus on tradition was cited as the leading factor in preventing growth. One school leader shared, “I kept reiterating that we can’t use words like ‘this is how we’ve always done it.’ We had to be more intentional about what we are doing.” Another leader included, “We have a strong heritage and attention to legacy and valuing of the past, and we also have a ‘why change it’ mentality.”

This focus on tradition can cause schools to lack the ability to pivot quickly or make needed decisions in a timely manner. One leader included, “We take a long, long time to make a big decision. My hands are tied. We have an inability to move past the past.”

### **Humility that Prevents Deep Learning**

Another factor that has prevented growth and change is a sense of humbleness that has prevented those working in Christian schools from sharing successes with others. To do so seemed “too braggy,” as one leader expressed. But through the experiences of 2020, a sharing of ideas and success has become more normal for Christian schools. As one leader put it, “We’ve been willing to share what we’re doing more freely. Sharing your learning equals deeper learning.”

### **A shortage of Leadership Hours**

An additional factor that has prevented growth and change is what might be a school leader’s most precious resource: time. Many school leaders expressed limits on their schedules as a factor in their leadership, and, in turn, a factor in the growth of the school. One leader cited,

“We [Christian school leaders] need more time . . . to get things done. Schedules are very crammed. We need relational capacity to collaborate and change, but that takes time.”

A continued demonstration of the value of Christian education is one of those changes school leaders have had to face. One school leader shared, “We need to continually show parents the value of the product that we are giving people for the price that they are paying. . . . I continually try to send a message to faculty and staff to get them to understand parents want a return on their investment.”

School leaders who are comfortable with change and equipped to lead in a crisis have been able to guide positive adjustments in their schools. Through the course of the pandemic, many school leaders discovered new—and improved—ways to operate because they had no choice. After doing everything via Zoom, one school learned that some events actually work better that way. Another shared, “Our teachers have become much more innovative, and teachers have grown in their capacity to learn how to do things differently.”

During the pandemic, many school leaders looked at improvements needed in the student experience. As one shared, “I never liked the culture of the lunchroom. It is small, and we cram kids in. Kids are stressed and anxious and wondering if they have a seat. With COVID-19, we [had] to spread out. We love the feel of lunch now. We have de-escalated the tension of lunch so much we will not go back.”

I encourage you to reflect on these keys to thriving in Christian school leadership: seeking crisis-focused leadership training and developing agility to change. The next post will feature Keys 3, 4, and 5. Keep leading well!