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Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership - Part 2 of 5

Joshua E. Bowar
Dordt University, josh.bowar@dordt.edu

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Josh Bowar

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In this series of posts, Dr. Josh Bowar highlights 10 Keys Christian school leaders need to unlock thriving in their leadership. Part 1 described Keys 1 and 2, with this post explaining Keys 3, 4, and 5.

What does a Christian school leader need in place to thrive before, during, and after a crisis? Part I discussed the needs to seek crisis-focused leadership training and to develop agility to change. Let's look at three more recommendations based on interviews conducted with Christian education leaders at 12 schools scattered throughout the United States.

KEY 3: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO SURROUND THEMSELVES WITH A SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM.

Leadership can no longer be a one-person job. School leaders thrive in places that provide support through strong leadership teams, support staff, and others who both balance and add to the leader's strengths and weaknesses. Schools would do well to cultivate leadership teams that feature individuals with gifts that complement and empower each other.

Many school leaders shared that having a strong relationship with their leadership team was most important to thriving in a crisis. "I love teaming with others to get the work done. I feel like I have a partner who I can lean on . . . , someone who can help me with the life-sucking things, someone who elevates my leadership," commented one school leader. "I've been working hard to streamline my admin team to connect with people better, and the depth of trust has increased," included another leader. One more leader continued: "Hire people who are way smarter than you, and then get out of the way."

When a strong team is in place, leaders feel comfortable facing whatever crisis comes their way: "You can change the title of the crisis, but if you have good people around you . . . those good people will address the situation with wisdom," shared one leader. Another school leader

further explained: “We have such an incredible leadership team that if they weren’t here I would be toast.”

Ideally, the leadership team is functioning well *before* a crisis hits. One school leader shared, “Having the right people on the right seat on the bus—that has been extraordinary. . . . We had already cultivated this idea of shared leadership.” Another included, “People understand the whole organization instead of their silo, so that when I need to make change, people know more about the whole picture. This builds trust. When there is not trust built, panic sets in, and that leads to fear.”

A healthy team of school leaders is beneficial both from a leadership and technical skill standpoint but also from a pacing standpoint. School leaders identified that they would benefit from additional leadership support at their school to fill gaps they have in their skillsets and to provide time for respite. One shared, “I would like someone else on my team who provides me with the opportunity to spend more time in mission advancement, someone who spends more time on teaching and learning and supporting teachers . . . so that I can focus on other things.”

Several leaders longed for assistance in the area of finances and sustainability, with one including, “I need someone on our team who is more gifted in developing healthy organizations.” “I need support in the acumen needed to increase our financial resources,” another shared. One more leader commented, “I need help with financial resources. How do you find them? How do you sustain them?”

Beyond adding to their skillsets, school leaders emphasized that having a strong leadership team provides them [or would provide them] with opportunities for respite. One school leader shared, “I’m not asking for a sabbatical . . . , but I wouldn’t mind hearing, ‘Hey, if you want to take a couple of days off, that would be just fine.’ For half a day to not do any technology and just spend time reflecting and praying and recharging. I wonder if we could have the permission to take a break from everything and see from that silence what comes into your mind. . . . But I need people to keep the school running so I can get this kind of respite.”

Leaders who work in smaller schools may have the opportunity to form cross-school connections and teams or could provide teachers with an interest in school leadership an opportunity to serve part-time on a leadership team.

Christian school leaders need support from a leadership team but also from their board. Therefore, we head to Keys 4 and 5.

KEY 4: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO INVEST IN AND BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT STRONG LEADER-BOARD RELATIONSHIPS.

A school leader thrives when their board supports them, believes in them, trusts them, gives them room to grow, provides the freedom of making choices, and listens to what they have to say. A key relationship is the one between the board president and the school leader; this relationship must be intentionally developed and sustained.

KEY 5: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO IMPLEMENT BOARD GOVERNANCE THAT FOCUSES ON THE MISSION AND THE FUTURE.

A school with a governance structure focused on the future versus one focused on fear or the status quo has more opportunities for success. Schools governed by traditional board models tend to be sluggish and reactionary. Boards governed by a mission have their eyes set on the future, even as they address the crisis of the moment. Leaders thrive in a model where their expertise, talents, gifts, and office are respected, nurtured, and empowered. In such a model, the school leader is viewed more as a CEO than as a middle manager.

Whereas the research revealed that school leaders value strong leadership teams, the study also demonstrated that strong relationships with the board are vital, with one school leader explaining, “I feel like the hub of the wheel with spokes running off it to parents, staff, students, and others. I must have that trust of the board to keep the wheel moving. These have been the hardest nine months of my life, but the trust has made it so much easier.” “I have a supportive board chair who is supportive of the decisions I make. He trusts me to make the right calls,” included another. One more school leader remarked, “Our board gets governance that focuses on the big picture. They trust my team to do the work and do the details.”

School leaders benefit from the support of their boards, with one explaining, “A strong board with a strong leader makes you most effective. Their words of affirmation mean a lot, and I have almost daily contact with the board president.” Another included, “When I have a board that will verbally tell me that I am doing a good job, that they are good with how you are leading, and when they don’t want to or try to micromanage, they are nonverbally telling you that they trust you and you’re doing a good job of what you’re doing. That affirmation goes a long way.”

Again, school leaders are blessed when they have a healthy relationship with the board president, with one emphasizing, “I feel supported when my board president does a weekly check-in and when I have conversations with him. It is good for him to show that he cares. When there is an openness with the people you work with, when the board takes time to understand the materials I’ve shared, and when the board asks questions out of a position of care for the school and for me, that’s when I know the board is with me.” I encourage you to keep reflecting on these keys to thriving in Christian school leadership: surrounding yourself with a strong leadership team and fostering a positive, supportive relationship with a board that understands mission- and future-focused governance. The next post will feature Keys 6 and 7. Keep leading well!