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Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership – Part 3 of 5

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, and Part 2 explained Keys 3, 4, and 5. This post will explore Keys 6 and 7.

KEY 6: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO ADVOCATE FOR ACCESS TO SELF-STEWARDSHIP AND COUNSELING.

Leadership is hard, and school leaders benefit from the opportunity to process situations, events, and their own leadership. Schools that provide access to and support for self-stewardship and counseling better serve and will be better served by their school leaders. School leaders and their boards should prioritize resources that promote mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Self-stewardship is important for school leaders. Self-stewardship is intentionally different than self-care. Whereas self-care has a reputation for being focused on relaxation, taking a “me day,” and indulgence, self-stewardship is focused on caring for yourself so that you can best serve others with the talents and gifts God gave you.

In my research study, school leaders identified structure and routine as important steps toward self-stewardship. As one explained, “Excellence is a building of habits. Routines ward off that feeling of chaos when crisis comes.” Some leaders build in time first thing in their day for a walk or for devotions, with one sharing, “Giving myself to the Lord at the beginning of the day is important and a centering piece. I walk right away in the morning and use that time to recenter. . . . I need those habits to fill me up personally with no one else in my head.”

Making time for self-stewardship makes these leaders more effective, as one commented, “When I started to make time for myself, I felt so much better about those other things God is calling me into.”

When self-stewardship, structures, and routines don't exist, failure happens. One school leader shared, "I saw the bottom from my own life. I had to struggle through health issues and wasn't taking care of myself. I remember lying prostrate on my living room floor at 3:00 AM because I couldn't shut it off and knew I needed to sleep." Fortunately, this leader was able to listen to God, admit his failures, and make needed changes.

Another school leader admitted, "I am too much of a workaholic and haven't taken a vacation in several months. I experienced not having rest and not being able to turn off. I learned that I need to take better care of myself."

School leaders need support in several areas of self-stewardship:

- **Overcommitting**

School leaders shared that they struggle with overcommitting—taking on too many things at one time and then feeling overwhelmed as a result. One shared, "I have accreditation and strategic planning and a campus site plan. We are looking at another alternative revenue thing. I am sure the board is wondering, 'How is he going to do this?' I sometimes feel like I'm not doing a good job because there is too much going on."

- **Difficulty Prioritizing**

Related to overcommitting is the difficulty of prioritizing. Prioritizing itself takes time, time that is hard to set aside. As one school leader explained, "Giving myself time to prepare my time is a challenge. I need 30 minutes to plan, but I always feel like I need to respond to emails, and someone is at my door."

Another struggle is deciding what to do yourself, and what to hand off to someone else. Here is how one leader described this dilemma: "There are so many things to do. . . . Deciding what to delegate is hard."

One leader chose to prioritize relationships: "I used to think there wasn't a cost to driving hard to a goal. Now I know there's a cost. You only have so much time and energy and you make decisions where to put it. People would rather have you healthy than finishing a board report a day early. Giving people time and attention is worth something, worth more than a lot of the things that I used to spend my time on."

For one school leader, prioritizing is about pacing, celebrating small wins and staying on the path: "I try to get my people to focus on something that helps us move the ball down the field—focusing on first downs, not touchdowns."

- **Being Open and Honest with Needs**

For school leaders to advocate well for access to self-stewardship and counseling opportunities, they need to start by being open and honest with their needs. This is an area where school leaders struggle. One included, “I’ve had a couple of times when I have been really down for weeks at a time. That is brutal and very real. . . . I’m not having any fun right now but haven’t expressed that to anyone. . . . I sometimes feel like I’m in a vacuum, but I’m not. How do we access each other and build a stockpile of people who can help each other? It is Kingdom work we are doing together.”

What can compound emotional struggles is the sense of loneliness that many leaders feel. One leader described this common struggle: “As much as we are team oriented and I have people I can reach out to, you’re still combatting that isolation and the loneliness of leadership which sounds crazy when I talk about team.”

School leaders are working on being kinder to themselves and paying attention to their self-talk. As one explained, “The permission to believe in myself and give myself a compliment is something I work on. I know what I am doing. I have wisdom and expertise. I have a growing sense that I am good at my job. I need permission to give myself a compliment and not beat myself up.”

- **Accessing Self-Stewardship and Counseling**

Access to self-stewardship and counseling supports Christian school leaders in the discipline of focusing on their faith, which promotes wellbeing and strength. One school leader included, “My walk with Jesus and my proximity to Christ is most critical for me. If we are following the leader closely, then others will get excited about that as they follow us.”

Another school leader shared this perspective on self-stewardship: “When I am being nourished by God’s Word, when I am taking time to physically sleep and exercise as a release, when I feel I have opportunity to have healthy emotional conversations with people where I can be authentic—from my wife to friends to others—I feel healthy. When I have balance, then I feel successful and [that I am] growing in my faith.”

One school leader summed up this need for spiritual direction this way: “School leaders need to be faithful to the calling that God has given them. . . . For me, faithful means showing up every day and giving my best effort. It’s a principled life.”

A primary avenue toward self-stewardship is explained in Key 7—

KEY 7: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER SCHOOL LEADERS.

School leaders need connections with other people who are traveling the same journey and experiencing the same phenomena. School leaders thrive when they have a network of support that can provide ideas, encouragement, and a sense of “we’re all in this together.”

Creating and sustaining connections with other school leaders provides a vital network of encouragement and support. Christian school leaders need to be able to depend on and reach out to other Christian school leaders. One school leader shared, “You need leaders that you can connect with on a regular basis and learn from and grow with.” Another school leader commented, “The ability to build relationships with multiple kinds of people is so important. You need . . . a network of people who can relate to your work.”

Thank you for reflecting on these keys to thriving in Christian school leadership: advocating for access to self-stewardship and creating and sustaining connections with other school leaders. The next post will feature keys 8 and 9. Keep leading well!