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Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership - Part 4 of 5

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Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership – Part 4 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, with part 2 explaining Keys 3, 4, and 5. Part 3 covered Keys 6 and 7, and part 4 details Keys 8 and 9.

There are many keys needed in order for a leader to thrive before, during, and after a crisis, but one thing that absolutely can't go missing is communication.

KEY 8: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO IMPLEMENT REGULAR, VALUE-ADDING METHODS OF COMMUNICATION BEFORE A CRISIS.

To lead well is to communicate. When communication with stakeholders doesn't happen, negativity flourishes and wheel-spinning occurs. Leaders must have training, support, and experience in communicating well with diverse stakeholders using tools and methods that have the most impact.

Communication in leadership is important. During the recent pandemic, Christian school leaders grew in understanding the importance of communication. As one school leader shared, "I have made weekly communication a priority, staying ahead of things. Don't surprise anyone." Another explained, "I have tried to be transparent about things. I've met with hundreds of families in the past nine months, which takes a lot of time and energy, but the time has been needed in order to communicate and help people understand things."

School leaders identified that communication is powerful when it focuses on a bright picture of the future—when it focuses on hope and a path to move forward. One leader said, "I wanted to provide courage, clarity, and hope." Another shared, "Casting vision and helping our community see that this isn't forever, being hope-filled and joy-filled, was really important in our communication. Throughout Scripture, a lot of really terrible things have happened to God's people, but the word *rejoice* is seen throughout the Bible. [Joy] is found in the Lord. We need to point our communities to that."

Some leaders shared that they felt the need to provide clarity when the situation was unclear. As one said, “I took bold action in the face of uncertainty. I didn’t wait until the answers were clear. I made decisions that would initially provide as much clarity for those I serve as possible.” Another leader added, “We needed to make decisions quickly and help people understand them. And that comes from frequent communication.”

Having clear communication channels and being seen in the school community also contributed to leadership success. One leader included, “If you have someone in the leadership role that is continually speaking to people about hope and being seen through the various means we had to use, people feel supported. They feel OK. It’s a time to hear the leader and important for a leader to be seen and heard during a crisis.”

School leaders continually emphasized the importance of being heard, seen, and trusted. “During a crisis, you need your foundation in the Lord strong so that storms don’t blow you back and forth. And be seen. You take on the role of a pastor or shepherd, calling people and checking in on them, trying to be empathetic when crisis hits, giving people time to work through things. I’ve found it’s important to be honest with your people in the reality of where you are at and also give them hope for where you are going. Give people facts and hope,” stated one school leader.

Of course, communication does not prevent all issues from arising. Where there are humans, there will be conflict involving personnel.

KEY 9: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO SEEK TRAINING AND SUPPORT IN PERSONNEL ISSUES.

School leaders benefit from understanding people, how to work with people, how to manage conflicts, and how to develop their team. Leaders also benefit from having support staff available to assist with personnel issues.

Working with people is a huge part of being a Christian school leader; therefore, leaders benefit from experience and training in personnel issues. Through the pandemic, school leaders have been able to encourage employees in their resilience. As one leader explained, “Teachers have realized that they . . . can do a lot more than they thought they could. We have jettisoned ourselves at least five years in technology in eight months. . . . The pressure of the necessity to learn—do or die— . . . was good for us.”

Other leaders affirmed the need to notice and name staff members’ resilience: “People have learned resiliency within themselves, and it’s a quiet confidence. We need to name that for people and reframe it for staff so they can get that quiet confidence.” Several identified the importance of supporting and encouraging their employees, with one commenting, “We would

not be able to do this without our people. . . . We are striving to not only survive the year but want to walk out of the year with a story . . . that will move us into the future.”

School leaders explained having to deal with people who are unhappy is a constant stress. One school leader admitted, “There always seems to be somebody on my staff that is unhappy, and people handle that differently. I prefer it if they would come to me in person and I have a conversation with them. But what I have is an employee who is notorious for running around to talk to everyone to tell them what they don’t like. I wonder when I should tolerate that and when I should show grace and kindness and model that there’s a better way.”

Many leaders emphasized the importance of being wise when solving problems, not shining a spotlight on small issues so that you don’t make them big issues. A school leader advised, “Keep local issues local. Don’t make a small issue too broad or global. Don’t write an article about something just because a few people have a problem.”

Others emphasize the importance of delegation, encouraging others to share leadership when it comes to personnel issues. One explained, “I help people realize their strengths and then give them tasks to do because they are good at something. People feel very energized by being selected to do a task because they’re good at it.”

The most-mentioned challenge (by far) that school leaders face on a daily basis is dealing with people who are simply not at their best, helping people work through various issues when these people are under enormous amounts of stress and pressure. One school leader described this challenge: “People not being at their best [in a crisis] is so stressful. It’s like we are all living with a low-grade fever. Tensions are high and we don’t always know the whole story. We are trying to manage the low-grade fever and not create spikes in the fever. How do we continue to disarm and throw water on it and cool things down? I remind my team that people are not at their best. We need to de-escalate. It’s not about speaking truth to people all the time. It’s helping people get over the hump.” I hope these keys to thriving in Christian school leadership have been helpful for you: implementing quality communication and becoming equipped in personnel issues. The next post will feature Key 10 and a conclusion. Keep leading well!