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

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Crisis Mode: 10 Keys to Unlock Thriving in Christian School Leadership – Part 5 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 named Keys 6 and 7, and part 4 detailed Keys 8 and 9. Part 5 will focus on Key 10 and a wrap-up of the 10 keys.

In Key 7, we already explored the value of connecting with other school leaders. Key 10 suggests establishing a relationship with someone (or an organization) outside your school system who will mentor, support, and encourage you in your leadership skills.

KEY 10: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO INVEST IN THEMSELVES THROUGH LEADERSHIP COACHING.

With a demanding and ever-changing work environment, leaders need coaching to navigate well. Coaching provides leaders a place to brainstorm, a safe outlet, and an opportunity to be challenged and encouraged. Coaching leads to leadership confidence and thriving.

Several leaders indicated that they would benefit from coaching. One shared, “Having a leadership coach would be great. It’s just part of accountability and growing.” Another added, “I need support and someone to talk with. I need to build into the budget some space for that.” One more included, “I am ready for another step in my professional learning, and I have often thought of coaching. I am wanting to keep learning from an outside organization or person.”

Leaders emphasized the benefits they could experience from coaching: “The areas of project managing and ways to organize better are at the top of my list. I want to talk with someone about things like sustainability as far as money and enrollment. I want to keep the flywheel moving forward. I also want coaching in how to rest personally, which is a different way of leading that is more sustainable. . . . I need to get smarter at better use of time and energy.” An additional school leader mentioned, “I need knowledge. I need to keep learning about things in vulnerability and self-awareness. The fear is that I am going to step into a pothole that I don’t know exists. There is no manual to leading a school and think I would benefit from a coach.”

School leaders shared that they need coaching on how to be flexible while staying true to their mission. One included, “Christian school flexibility to get into the marketplace with quality education in a new way is what is going to make all the difference. The mission doesn’t change, the purpose doesn’t change, but the delivery and model might need to change.” School leaders explained that Christian schools need to stay relevant and must have excellent leaders. One added, “The ability for Christian schools to stay culturally aware and relevant while maintaining their foundation on God’s Word is going to be so important.”

School leaders shared that they need coaching on how to demonstrate value. One leader would welcome the opportunity to discuss how the school can be more visible in the community: “We need to be taking what we do out of the classroom and into the community. That is what is going to win the day. We can keep score on petty things with public schools, but it’s when our kids are doing things for the community that we really shine. When people start to see real people in the real world meeting real needs, that’s going to take us to the next level in Christian education. [These activities demonstrate] value for the parents who are willing to pay for it.”

KEY TAKE-AWAYS FROM THE 10 KEYS

Leadership is hard. Leading during a crisis is even harder. Believe me, I’ve been there and continue to travel the path. The Ten Keys outlined in this blog series are designed to help you thrive. It is my hope that a few of the ideas helped you. And, who knows? As you feel more equipped and confident, you may find yourself enjoying the work and calling of leadership more.

The Ten Keys shared can be seen as a goal for your school and your leadership. However, knowing where to start may seem overwhelming. Let me further highlight three of these Keys as I believe they are foundational to successfully leading through any crisis: leadership coaching, self-stewardship, and board governance focused on the mission and the future.

When I experienced my first crisis, I started working with a leadership coach and continue to do so to this day. Leadership coaching has allowed me to see my blind spots, to have a safe space to problem-solve (and vent), and to both develop myself personally and professionally. To be able to work through various personal and professional issues with someone who understands what you are tackling yet still holds you accountable while providing encouragement is of great worth to every leader. Professional athletes have coaches, so why should professional Christian school leaders be any different? People at the top of their game benefit from coaching; to desire coaching demonstrates a desire to improve from a position of strength. Leadership coaching has made all the difference for me, and I highly recommend it for you.

In my early experiences with my leadership coach, I remember blurting out, “I am so tired!” I was overwhelmed by taking conversations and translating them into movement. I was also coming off 18 months of managing the intensity of a sexual abuse scandal in our school—I was running on fumes and needed care.

My own self-stewardship became one of my greatest priorities. Becoming more intentional about nutrition, sleep, and fitness has helped me lead both a healthier and a more fulfilling life, changes that have translated directly into the level of my leadership success. As leaders, we easily forget that our bodies are what carry us through a crisis. Stress lives inside the body . . . but can also be released through our bodies. We forget that some of the most transformational work we can do for both ourselves and our schools happens through self-stewardship.

Serving as a backdrop to my leadership coaching and self-stewardship has been my school’s board governance structure. Prior to working through crisis, my board made the intentional decision to change from a traditional board governance structure (a 100-year-old tradition) to a structure called *mission-directed governance*.

This did not come without several growing pains and many discussions (and so much editing of the board policy manual!). Because my school has chosen to implement a mission- and future-focused governance model that views the head of school’s role as a CEO and not as a middle manager, I have been given the freedom and room to lead. The school has been able to move forward with a visionary board leading the charge. I have been able to nimbly respond to crises, taking action to do what’s best for the school, while still being held accountable for my decisions.

In order to discern support, resources, and potential next steps regarding all of the ten keys, I encourage you to reach out to a nearby college or university, a national Christian school organization, other school leaders, and/or Christian school consulting services. I would love to hear from you and share specific resources if you are interested. There are many ways to move forward and many people who want to help. Funding various resources and methods of support can also happen through grants, budgeting line items, and government programs such as Title II and Title IV.

In summary, there’s no doubt about it: the world needs Christian schools.

Christian schools need effective leaders.

And Christian school leaders need support and tools to thrive—before, during, and after crisis.

I encourage you to pursue the 10 Keys of thriving in Christian school leadership:

- KEY 1: Seek out crisis-focused leadership training.**
- KEY 2: Learn and practice leadership agility to better respond to change.**
- KEY 3: Surround yourself with a supportive leadership team.**
- KEY 4: Invest in and be intentional about a strong school leader-board relationship.**
- KEY 5: Implement board governance that focuses on the mission and the future.**
- KEY 6: Advocate for access to self-stewardship and counseling.**
- KEY 7: Create and sustain connections with other school leaders.**
- KEY 8: Implement regular, value-adding methods of communication well before a crisis.**
- KEY 9: Seek training and support in personnel issues.**
- KEY 10: Invest in yourself through leadership coaching.**

What you do and who you are as a Christian school leader makes all the difference. May the Ten Keys be an encouragement and a roadmap for you on your journey of faithful, effective, fulfilling Christian school leadership. May they unlock thriving!