



## Christian School Leadership: Strategic Leadership

Let's begin this strategically and put the conclusion at the beginning: strategic leadership means discipline and patience over time. It means that the Christian school can achieve any of its ambitions, prayerfully conceived, with discipline and patience over time. CSM consultants routinely tell its schools that there is no ambition larger than the ability of strategic leadership to achieve.

Of course, there have been many articles and books written about strategic leadership and many wise things have been said in them. But for us at this time, discipline and patience is our watch cry.

Now let's go back to the beginning. What is strategic leadership intended to have as outcomes? Alan Pue writes in *Rethinking Strategic Planning for Christian Schools*: "We don't live in a world in which our efforts have no meaning. We are beings created in the image of God, and we have been given the capacity to see beyond current reality, the wisdom to make necessary changes in how we can best fulfill our calling, and the capacity for the courage necessary to make tough decisions along with way. Don't squander those remarkable gifts. Use them to better become what God has called you to be and to excel still more" (p. xix and xx). The call to excel is a bitter sweet one for Christian schools where we have been content with mediocrity for too long. A good example of this is the attitude of our schools to enrollment. CSM rarely works with a Christian school that has taken the trouble to determine what full enrollment looks like – when every class is full – and to have as a strategic objective the desire and intention to fill every class. The result are budgets that are routinely short \$100,000 or more, enrollment shortfalls that would eliminate deficits and allow the school to invest in its people.

Discipline and patience over time includes the important idea that we have an ethical obligation to foresee, to understand the meaning of our present situation and foresee (even imagine) what could and what should be. Robert Greenleaf writes in *The Servant as Leader*: "The failure or refusal of a leader to foresee may be viewed as an ethical failure ... to make the effort at an earlier date to foresee today's events and take the right actions when there was freedom for initiative to act". Another example is that we are (this is written in 2018) ten years away from a recession that devastated the finances of schools across the United States and beyond. We can look back at the recessions of 1973, 1979-80, 1991, 2001, 2007-8 and recognize that our current expansion is ten years old and counting. It is inevitable that, based on the past, we are due another recession sooner rather than later and schools should be planning with that in mind. What CSM finds in its visits to our schools is a somewhat Pollyanna outlook that says that this time is different and almost an ostrich approach to the reality of the next recession.

Foresight, the key ethical action of strategic thinking has both a present and a past, not just a future. Strategic leadership means having the ability to analyze the present, understanding key

performance indicators such as income paying for expenses, net tuition per student, financial aid as a percentage of total net tuition. It means knowing key data points and thinking about their trend implications – if there is a large class graduating in two years we can expect a decline in income at that time which isn't anyone's fault but needs paying attention to (maybe the excess number in the class should be considered income for the cash reserve rather than as operating income). Strategic leadership means understanding the past. If there is a pattern, we can expect the pattern to continue unless we take action to disrupt it.

Most strategic leadership, in other words, is not guesswork. We are fortunate to be in an industry that is remarkably resilient from year to year, even through recessions, and that is therefore largely predictable even when it seems to be idiosyncratic. Enrollment grows for predictable reasons. It declines for predictable reasons. The school uses next year's income for this year's expenses because predictable decisions were made while schools with prosperous finances are so also because of decisions that obeyed the rules of running a school.

This is no place for a lengthy exegesis of the story of God's people. But it is pretty clear that, while not all details might be known, rebellion against God brought obvious consequences and obedience to God brought obvious blessings. And the sweep of history is clearly the outflow of God's covenant love for his creation, not at all inchoate events. History is foreseeable as the prophets showed, and discipline and patience over time accomplished and is accomplishing the sweep of God's love for us.

So then, strategic leaders know and act on the following:

- The past is a trendline predicting the future, unless we intervene
- The present is a story with a past and we determine the storyline under grace
- The future is achieved through foresight and discipline and patience over time

What of this discipline and patience over time? Jim Collins writes in *Good to Great and the Social Sector*: "Mediocre companies rarely display the relentless culture of discipline – disciplined people who engage in disciplined thought and who take disciplined action – that we find in truly great companies. A culture of discipline is not a principle of business; it is a principle of greatness". Let's put that into practical action.

**Board of Trustees:** great strategic leaders help Boards create Strategic Plans undergirded with financial sinews and accountable metrics; they require Boards to stick to their plans with ferocity using the phrase – if it isn't in the plan, we are not doing it; they are perfectly able to adapt their plans, annually or even more frequently, but always within the context of a disciplined decision-making process. The Strategic Plan defines the action of the Board and the evaluation of the Head of School / Principal. The Financial Management spreadsheet defines the use of money and refuses to allow slipshod and erratic expenditures based on whim and personal desire.

**Head of School:** great strategic leaders spend time with their Boards, their philanthropic leaders, their team, and their parents; they are intent on the quality of people; they refuse to countenance mediocrity and are continually developing their people, as well as moving people out of the school and bringing people into the school who can deliver the mission to children and carry out the Strategic Plan.

Faculty: great strategic leaders understand that focusing fiercely on excellence in mission delivery, focusing fiercely on communicating mission to every constituent, and focusing fiercely on continual professional/personal and learning community growth are the three primary levers for school enrollment success.

The ability to act with discipline and patience over time has one other characteristic in strategic leadership. It is the ability and desire to continually adapt to what is going on in the school's context. We know (present) that children are presenting us with greater and different challenges while parents are asking for more in a more competitive environment. We know (past) that this change has been going on for over a decade now, in fact, can be traced back generationally. We also know (present and past) that the basic structure of school and the financial parameters of school have not changed discernibly, maybe excepting the greater inclusion of each employee within the leadership role and the emphasis on team that has come later to the school than to other industries. Adapting to ongoing challenges means that the strategic leader must understand and use time well. If time is constantly spent dealing with "crisis", adaptation is ipso facto not going to happen. If time is constantly spent in micro-managing people, adaptation is not going to happen. Drucker states in Know Your Time that effective knowledge workers "do not start with their tasks. They start with their time". Time is the commodity in shortest supply. The strategic leader therefore must know how time is used and allocate it in a fashion that allows for good management, as well as the thinking and reflection and consultation required for adaptation. The statement, I don't have enough time, usually means that the leader has not determined what not to do in order to do what is critical. In one school, the leader had to focus single-mindedly on enrollment and the drivers of enrollment. There was nothing else that could distract him although there were many worthy candidates! His 8 months of total focus did not result in the loss of excellence in the school. Rather, the excellent people in the school did their jobs and he was, by the grace of God, successful in increasing enrollment after several years of decline, thus providing resources and expertise for the school (a virtuous cycle).

Strategic leadership can truly mean many things. CSM believes that Christian schools should focus on just a few of those beginning with discipline and patience over time. This focused approach relying on a real understanding of past and present allows foresight to be "true" and effectively implemented.

CSM Mission: For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students

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CSM is a 501(c)(3) dedicated to healthy, hopeful Christian schools. It works with Christian schools that have an average tuition K-12 under \$12,360. 10% of its revenues is tithed into the CSMA Foundation in order to assist Christian leaders and schools with advice/counsel and to fund Christian school research. We charge for consulting based on the tuition level of the individual school to make it affordable for all.

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