

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADER**

This white paper will explore essential characteristics of a Christian school leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The paper is an outgrowth of many conversations which revolve around change. Those questions include such things as: Are the essential characteristics of school leaders the same today as they were a generation ago? As school boards seek new leaders, what are the essential characteristics of leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The paper is based on an assumption. That assumption is that the Christian school leader is the head of school or lead principal. The leader is not the Christian school board. This assumption will be troubling to some boards and administrators. Some principals/heads of school shy away from the burden of the responsibility to be the leader of the school. Some boards will not permit the principal/head of school to be the leader. This is neither a small or large school matter, but a matter of understanding of best practice and roles for the board and the principal/head of school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper asserts that the Christian school leader is the head of school or principal. At the same time, and as one of our contributors wisely wrote, "A leader cannot rise above the Board, and the Board cannot rise above its leader."

The paper is the result of anecdotal comments and reflections. We consistently hear seasoned school leaders note that the role of the Christian school leader has changed dramatically over the past decade, that the expectations of boards have changed, and that priorities have shifted. The paper seeks to stimulate thought and create conversation so that school boards and principals/heads of schools understand their respective roles, complement each other, and serve well together.

The purpose of this paper is not to answer every question. It is certainly not intended to suggest that any individual can be or can do all things. Neither is the purpose intended to suggest that the prioritizing of characteristics will be the same for every board or community. The order of the characteristics is not intended to imply that the characteristics are rank ordered.

There is good work on the subject of leadership in the marketplace. Jim Collins, Steven Covey, John Maxwell and many others have produced thoughtful books on educational leadership. Individuals such as George Barna, Henry Blackaby, Rick Warren, Walter Wright, and others challenge us to be spiritual leaders, but they do not speak directly to leaders in Christian education. Those works can inform us well. None of those works speaks directly to the character and characteristics of Christian school leaders.

It is not the role of Christian Schools International to direct member schools. Christian Schools international does seek to provide frameworks and parameters within which school leaders and boards are enabled to establish their own policies. Christian Schools international seeks to support schools as they carry out their mission, advance the kingdom of God, and educate the next generation of disciples. We seek to glorify God in all that we do.

The danger of producing a paper on this topic is to create the sense that school leaders must be all things to all people. That is not true. No one person could possibly exemplify every desired characteristic. It must be recognized that grace and opportunity for growth are necessary in communities.

The paper is produced with three audiences in mind. It is intended for current Christian school leaders who should continually be examining their strengths and their challenges. It is intended for individuals who are sensing the call to leadership and considering their gifts and abilities. It is intended for governing boards which seek to support current leaders and which may be looking for new leaders.

In order to identify and frame the characteristics of Christian school leaders, Christian Schools International has assembled some of the best thinking of leaders who have exemplified excellence in leadership in Christian schools. About 400 years of Christian school leadership is represented in the contributors. We are grateful for their thoughtful insights. Those insights emerged from both experience and research. Those who were willing to be identified are acknowledged on the last page of the paper.

## **BIBLICAL SERVANT LEADER**

One of our valued contributors made the following comment by way of introduction, “my list assumes that the leader has the appropriate spiritual qualifications.” We understand the comment. The contributor is suggesting that spiritual leadership is a must. It must be the foundational characteristic onto which all other characteristics are built. Because it is at the core of the characteristics of a Christian school leader, it is too important to make any assumptions.

While the introduction stated that the characteristics are not intended to be rank ordered, that is not the case for the characteristic of biblical servant leader. This characteristic is listed first, because it must be first. Without it, the mission of a Christian school cannot be effectively carried forward. It is the characteristic that most differentiates the Christian school leader from all other excellent leaders.

### **The Shepherd**

One of the oft quoted summary statements about spiritual leadership comes from Henry Blackaby, “Spiritual leadership is moving people on to God’s agenda.” In order to move people on to God’s agenda, the leader must first seek to be on God’s agenda himself or herself. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus instructs his disciples to seek first his kingdom and righteousness. He encourages us by teaching us that those who seek will find. God’s agenda is the advancement of his kingdom. The task of the leader, as Blackaby says, is to move people to a kingdom-first agenda.

Jesus provided us with a model. He described himself as a shepherd. Before he left the earth, he passed the mantle to his disciples. He spoke to Peter and said, “Feed my sheep.” Today those who have accepted the call to lead have received the same gospel challenge. Shepherds see to it that the flock is fed. Christian school leaders are called to shepherd the flock. Shepherd leaders are called to guide the flock on to God’s agenda; advancing the kingdom of God. It takes a kingdom minded shepherd to take

on the task. School communities will be best served by Christian school leaders who seek to be shepherds like Jesus.

### **Authentic**

Authenticity is a mark of a biblical servant leader. Christian school leaders must be individuals of integrity and humility, but those traits must emerge from the foundation of biblical servant leadership. The Apostle Paul wrote, "When I am weak, then I am strong." While a leader must develop an appropriate level of confidence, confidence must be bathed in integrity and humility. No one will survive as a leader in the long term if confidence is not balanced with humility.

Leaders are most effective when they are transparent. False fronts will eventually crumble and be buried under the weight of their own collapse. An effective leader understands that. An effective leader balances honesty with grace and tact. Christian school leaders must be authentic individuals.

### **Community Builder**

Individualism is a mark of humanism and the Hellenism of Jesus' day. While it is a biblical truth that each of us is created in the image of the Creator, Scripture points us to community and not to individualism. Before Jesus went to the cross a portion of his final prayer to the Father was the expression of their desire that his children be one in the same way that the Godhead is one. Jesus expresses a plea that his people will live in shalom; in obedience to God and in harmony with each other. That is intimacy!

Paul provides us with another illustration of the vital importance of community. He used the metaphor of the body. He reminded us that no individual body part can function on its own. Every part is of equal value. Every part is to be honored. To value and honor the various parts with all of their strengths and weaknesses requires that the community be grace-filled.

A biblical leader is a community minded builder. Instilling a climate of community is essential for the governing board, the staff, students, and the general school community. An effective leader will not only recognize the importance of community, but will seek to create a climate of community.

Effective leaders understand the value of lifelong learning, model it, and instill the value within the staff. A faculty is ineffective in isolation. Individuality must be replaced with collaboration. The effective leader creates a sense of team within the staff and builds a community that works, serves, and learns together.

A chapter of the book Schools As Communities was written by Bruce Hekman and it is entitled *Communities of Grace*. Not only must leaders be community minded, but they must also develop a sense for the nature of biblical community in a Christian school. The nature of authentic Christian school community is characterized by the attributes of grace, mercy, peace, and shalom. Leaders of grace-filled communities understand that the community will be broken, but in Christian community restoring what is broken will be an intentional goal of the leader.

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR**

### **Articulate the mission of the school**

Not every leader will be skilled in every form of communication. Some are fluent, engaging speakers. Some are gifted writers. Yet, effective communication is an essential component of effective Christian school leadership. The board is entrusted with the mission of the school. The school leader is empowered to articulate it and champion it to the various constituencies of the school.

One-on-one and small group communication is a necessary skill. It is critical for the Christian school leader to be equipped to tell the school's story to prospective parents, donors, media, community leaders, etc. What's the "soul" of the school? What is the school accomplishing? How does the school's story connect to the Kingdom of God?

Effective communication comes in various forms. The effective Christian school leader will assess his or her own gifts. If his gift is speaking, then speak. If her gift is writing, then write. The effective Christian school leader understands that communicating the mission of the school is an essential and ongoing task of the leader.

### **Relational**

Christian school leadership is a relational business. It is of critical importance for the Christian school leader to strategize and building positive, engaging relationship with students, parents, staff, community and church leadership even if it means stepping outside of his or her comfort zone.

Relational leadership requires the soft skills of empathy, understanding, and compassion. The relational leader will at times administer tough love, but with mercy and grace. Consistent, timely and clear communication is a mark of the relational leader.

### **Ability to Influence Others**

Under the umbrella of school are different communities within community. Every school has an internal and an external community.

Within the internal community are staff and faculty, students, parents, and the governing board. Within the external community are churches, grandparents, and supporters. The external community is also the businesses and people around the school who may or may not have a defined connection to the school.

The effective school leader has the ability to discern the various communities and their makeup. The leader understands the importance of influencing the various communities to understand the mission of the school. The Christian school seeks to glorify God, and so its reputation within its various communities hinge on the leader's ability to be an influencer. If done in a positive way, when the circumstances arise that cause the school's reputation is in jeopardy, the school will likely have many more advocates expressing support and encouragement when the influencer has been effective.

## **Flexibility**

The best laid plans must sometimes be set aside and at other times laid to rest. The organized to-do list for the day may remain untouched. The effective school leader is flexible. Priorities will often change because of circumstances both within and outside of the control of the school leader.

An inflexible school leader will more likely than not look around and discover that there is no one following. The flexible school leader follows the example of the Good Shepherd. Even though 99 of the 100 were moving along with him obediently, he recognized that one was missing. His agenda was set aside. He left the 99 to find the one which was lost.

Unspoken in the story of the Good Shepherd is the situation for the 99. There is no doubt that he did not leave them to be on their own. Had he done so, upon his return with the lost one, he would have found at least 50 more to be missing. While flexibly attending to the lost sheep, the shepherd would have left the 99 to be cared for by someone else. He would have communicated his plan and left instructions for the care of the flock.

Flexibility does not mean flying by the seat of one's pants without proper planning or preparation. It means having the skills to adapt and adjust plans to fit unforeseen circumstances. The effective Christian school leadership understands the importance of flexibility and being flexible while exhibiting calm and confidence.

## **ENTREPRENEUR**

### **Empower Innovators**

Must the leader be an innovator? Certainly being an innovator is a positive characteristic in a rapidly changing time. School communities reflect the culture and in our culture there is little tolerance for the status quo. While the leader may not be an innovator, he or she must be one who recognizes innovation. Supporting and encouraging staff to be innovative is a desired quality. The effective leader is one who recognizes the gifts of individuals and empowers the staff to be innovators.

### **Empower Educators (vs educational leader)**

There was a time not long ago when the primary role of the school leader was administration. Managing the school well was a high priority. Good management remains important. Times changed and so did priorities. In more recent times management was no longer a primary role but being the educational leader became a new number one.

Being an educational leader was defined as being an educational expert. The school leader was expected to be an expert in curriculum and instruction, best practices and pedagogy, and in instructional design and assessment. All the while, administration and management remained important. The period was another example of adding without subtracting.

Some school leaders will embrace the role of educational leader. It will be a characteristic that many who move from classroom to school leader will have or embrace. It is certainly important that educational innovation and leadership be evident in the Christian school. After all, our mission revolves around educating God's children.

Other school leaders will assess their gifts and find this characteristic missing. The key is not necessarily to have the characteristic. The key is to insure that gifts are identified and educational leadership is discovered. If the leader does not identify this characteristic in himself or herself, he or she must demonstrate the discernment to identify educational leadership among the faculty team and to empower those individuals to lead the educational programs of the Christian school.

## **EXECUTIVE**

### **Management skills**

The daily operation of the Christian school should be the responsibility of the school leader. In some communities boards have traditionally played a role in daily operation. That is a tradition that those boards should change. Board members are volunteers, the school leader is the individual who the board should entrust and empower to see to daily operation of the school.

In order to carry out responsibilities, the management skills are an important characteristic of the effective leader. Those skills include the ability to organize, set workable structures in place, plan systematically, communicate clearly and in a timely manner, and meaningfully engage with staff and stakeholders.

An important skill for the effective school manager is the ability to identify his or her own strengths. For example, not every effective leader is detail oriented. Recognizing such, the effective leader will find an administrative assistant or a vice principal who has the skill and can complement and support the work of the school leader.

### **Knowledge and Competence**

The effective leader will be passionate about their calling, God's children, and education. The effective leader will have skills in educational leadership, financial planning and management, communication, and creating systems that move everything in a singular direction. The effective leader must be knowledgeable and competent in carrying out the mission of the school.

Knowledge of educational leadership, student learning, best instructional practice, finance, and effective management procedures are essential. Knowledge is gained through continuing education, experience, and collaboration. The effective school leader continually seeks to improve by gaining knowledge and networking with those who are leading effectively in other Christian schools.

Competency is equal to knowledge in importance. A competent leader has knowledge and skills. A competent leader is able to recognize problems and identify issues. A competent leader is skilled to discern and identify strategies to address situations which arise in timely and effective ways.

### **Strategic Thinker**

Those who govern Christian schools face the challenge of guiding the school to a sustainable future. The school leader is one who is able to create the roadmap and to guide the school along the pathway in the direction to which God is leading them.

The leader will be able to build upon the roadmap as he or she engages key stakeholders in the strategic vision for the school. Articulating the strategic vision will be a key component to raise the funds that will be needed to carry forward the vision.

### **VISIONARY LEADER**

#### **A kingdom vision**

A biblical leader in Christian schools is a kingdom visionary. The mission of Christian Schools International includes the phrase, "for the advancement of God's kingdom. The biblical leader seeks to lead for the purpose of equipping students for a life of kingdom service. God is king. The world belongs to God. His kingdom has come. But brokenness remains for a time. Kingdom focused leaders and schools have a vision of restoring God's shalom to the chaos and brokenness of the world.

#### **Collaborative Style**

Collaboration is not weakness. There was a time when many Christian school leaders were more like benevolent dictators than collaborators. It was an effective, efficient style of leadership in many communities. Today collaborative minded leaders lead most effectively.

No one has every skill necessary to lead a school to high levels of standards, performance and outcomes. But collectively it is likely that together the faculty and staff has those skills. The school leader seeks to identify skills, release those skills for the good of all involved, and empower teams. The effective Christian school leader identifies, respects, and honors every part of the body and the unique gifts and functions of every part.

#### **Wisdom and Discernment**

An effective school leader has a measure of wisdom and is able to discern. Schools are complex. School communities are increasingly diverse. There are multiple stakeholders and constituencies represented in the school family. There are communities within the school community. The school leader must be able to navigate the messiness of the school. A discerning mind is a gift and discernment is a skill which the Christian school leaders will need.

## **Passion**

Without a love for God and his children and without a passion for students and their learning, an individual will not be an effective Christian school leader. Leaders must love what they do. If they do not, the burdens of leadership will become too great a burden and the leader will soon lose hope. Leading in a Christian school is not for the faint of heart. It requires an individual to have a fire of desire in their chest. Emphasizing that an individual must be a person of passion is not meant to discourage. It is simply to say that a school leader must love the blessings and challenges if the leader hopes to be a successful school leader.

## **Community**

Communities tend to prefer things to be the way they are. People are drawn to communities because they like the characteristics of the community at the time that they chose it for themselves. That is true of schools as well. When we invite parents and students to join our school communities, we market the school as it is at the present time. We may talk about our vision, but parents and students come into a present reality.

While that is certainly true and a reason for celebration, like any organism or organization school communities are either advancing or declining. Simply maintaining communities as they are and being satisfied with the status quo will only work for a short time. That is increasingly true. The world is changing at a rapid rate and pace.

The school leader finds a good balance between celebrating what is and dreaming about what could and will be. The effective school leader causes the community to embrace what is and celebrate. The effective school leader guides the community to dream of what will be and moves the community toward continual school improvement in order that dreams turn to reality.

## **Restless Curiosity**

Leaders will be tired and leaders cannot be tired. That is not intended to be a contradiction. Leaders will become weary under the weight of the challenges and responsibilities of the role. But the leader cannot let the weariness become a barrier to vision.

By the nature of Christian school leadership, the effective leader will always be restless and curious. Questions will always be on the leader's mind – How can we become better and more effective? Are we serving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and might? Are we continually nudging our standards higher and seeking to reach goals? Are we truly glorifying God in all that we do and say?

These are a sampling of questions that should always be kept in the front of the leader. But as stated earlier, the leader must not be alone in considering such questions. Strategically positioning the school for the future is a primary role of the board. The effective leader will work closely with the chair of the board to be future minded for the sake of kingdom service and sustainability. The effective leader will collaborate with faculty and staff as they wrestle with questions around standards and school

improvement. The school leader will be effective when he or she ignites restless curiosity in the board, among staff, and with the stakeholders in the community.

#### **SUMMARY NOTES:**

This white paper will end where it began: The danger of producing a paper on this topic is to create the sense that school leaders must be all things to all people. That is not true. No one person could possibly exemplify every desired characteristic. It must be recognized that grace and opportunity for growth are necessary in communities. If it were the expectation, neither no one on the leadership and none of our contributors could possibly qualify for Christian school leadership.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Strengths are to be celebrated for they are gifts from God. Weaknesses are to be supported and can be compensated for through growth and through collaborative teams.

Christian Schools International gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following leaders in Christian education for their insights in the preparation of this white paper. They are listed alphabetically:

Jeff Blamer, Vice President of Member Services, Christian Schools International

Dr. Bruce Hekman, Faculty member at the Van Lunen Center for Executive Christian School Management and Leadership Coach and Mentor

David Koetje, President and CEO, Christian Schools International

Larry Kooi, Retired head of school and Christian Schools International consultant

J Barry Koops, Retired head of school and Christian Schools International consultant

Jim Marsh, Head of School Emeritus, Westminster Christian Academy, St Louis, Missouri and Director of the Van Lunen Center, Calvin College

Jack Postma, Head of School Emeritus, Unity Christian High School, Hudsonville, Michigan

Ren Siebenga, Executive Director, Ontario Christian School Administrator Association, Ontario, Canada

David Smith, Executive Director, Kuyers Institute, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Bob VanWieren, Accreditation Program Director, Christian Schools International

Glenn Vos, Superintendent Emeritus, Holland Christian Schools, Holland, Michigan

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS:**

The introduction contained this important truism: "A leader cannot rise above the Board, and the Board cannot rise above its leader." This paper recognizes that it is crucial that the Christian school board and head of the Christian school must understand each other and their roles well. When the governance board and head of school do understand their respective roles, they will be best positioned to face the challenges of mission and sustainability together. This paper is meant to be a tool to create meaningful dialogue and understanding.

The paper is a tool for self-reflection by a Christian school leader. A leader could consider using the paper as tool for personal reflection and grow. The leader could identify areas of strength with reason to celebrate. The leader could identify areas that could become strengths, but are not, and make growth in those areas a part of annual goal setting. The leader could identify weak areas or characteristics that he or she does not possess. Could the leader grow the characteristic or could those areas be delegated to others?

The tool could be used by the school leader and board chair together. In the leader's self-reflection and the board chairs view, do their assessments of strengths and areas for growth closely match? The tool could be a healthy conversation starter as the leader of the school and leader of the board work together.

In a time of searching for the next head of school, the tool could be used by a search team as they examine the most important characteristics that the school will need in a new leader. The tool could be used to guide the team in their reflections and in identifying the characteristics in possible candidates. In this process it could be used by both the search team and the candidate as they decide together whether the candidate and the school are the right match for each other.

Finally, and most importantly, the list of characteristics and the paper as a tool are human creations. It is God who equips leaders for service and calls leaders to lead. If the paper is a tool for the school's governing body and the leader to discern God's calling then the tool can be used for the ultimate purpose of the Christian school. That is to glorify God in all that we are and all that we do. To God be the glory.

On the following page is a list of the characteristics for use as a sample tool.

# **CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADER**

## **BIBLICAL SERVANT LEADER**

**The Shepherd**

**Authentic**

**Community Builder**

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR**

**Articulate the mission of the school**

**Relational**

**Ability to Influence Others**

**Flexibility**

## **ENTREPRENEUR**

**Empower Innovators**

**Empower Educators (vs educational leader)**

## **EXECUTIVE**

**Management skills**

**Knowledge and Competence**

**Strategic Thinker**

## **VISIONARY LEADER**

**A kingdom vision**

**Collaborative Style**

**Wisdom and Discernment**

**Passion for God and students**

**Community mindedness**

**Restless Curiosity**

