PREPARING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

by Bill McKinley

A nyone who has been involved with Christian schools for a significant length of time will readily observe that the schools of the twenty-first century are dramatically different from the schools of 20 or 30 years ago. In fact, almost all schools are very different from how they were even 10 years ago. Very few Christian schools have the same head administrator they had 10 years ago, and in that same period most schools have a significantly different board of directors. There are usually staff changes every year. The curriculum of most schools is different in content, structure, and methods of delivery because every school strives annually to enhance its program and make the changes necessary for improvement.

The student composition of the school also changes continuously as students graduate, come, or leave for various reasons. These changes are especially true of a high school because the student body completely changes every four years and is essentially different every two years.

Change is inevitable, continuous, important, and extremely valuable for every school. Ultimately, the success and quality of the school depends on how successfully its leaders manage change.

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Leaders must be able to see the future of their school, to determine what that future should look like, and what they must do to lead their school to a higher level of accomplishment.

Proactively Plan Your Changes

It is important to be proactive about the changes that need to take place in your school, and that means you must plan for the changes needed to take your school where it needs to go. If you do not plan and choose the changes you want to take place, you may find yourself reacting to changes imposed on you by those around you. Since changes are going to happen, whether you like it or not, it is far better that you become the proactive change agent in your school and lead your school into the vision of the future that God gives you. Be a leader, not a reactionary.

Having vision, then, becomes a most important preliminary step in managing and implementing change in the school. Vision is the ability to see the future of the school, and a mission statement is the verbal expression of the vision. Any organizational changes must fit the vision and the mission of the school.

Consider the Cost

As you consider making changes in your school, you must carefully consider the costs and potential impact of these changes, financially and emotionally. Anticipating the budgetary impact is usually easier than anticipating the personal effect on your most important resource, your staff. Emotional stress, insecurities, and many similar concerns are often part of the difficulty of change.

Changing the Head Administrator

One of the most significant changes a school or any organization can experience is a change in the head administrator. It is generally expected that a new administrator will bring fresh ideas and perhaps a new leadership style. A leadership change can bring a new enthusiasm, and it provides an opportunity to review and rethink the school’s vision and direction.

In preparing for making changes in the school, a new administrator must give strong consideration to the impact the changes will have on the returning staff and school community.
It is important for the new administrator to spend adequate time in learning to understand the people and the programs that were there before he or she came. Developing a positive and supportive relationship throughout the school community is essential for successfully implementing changes. If the proposed changes are too radical or too numerous or too soon, there is likely to be a high degree of caution, skepticism, and perhaps even resistance.

A new administrator might find the following suggestions helpful:

- First year make friends; second year make changes. This cliché may be a little simplistic, but the concept is important. You should not try to import your own changes that are based on your previous experience and former school connections without spending adequate time to thoroughly understand the policies, procedures, and standards of your new school. You may find that your new school has some ideas you learn to like better than your previously held ideas.

- You must earn the right to make changes. You earn this right by developing a trusting and positive professional relationship with your new staff and school community. Doing so involves a lot of listening and evaluating alternate ideas and attitudes about proposed changes, and having a little give and take as you consider these changes. You cannot insist on calling all the shots and making every decision your way, or you run the risk of alienating others and making them feel unimportant in the decision-making process.

- During the initial stages of your leadership, undertake a process for the staff to identify the issues, problems, and areas of concern that are important to them. Identify the changes they want to see in the school, and make them your first priority. When possible, use staff committees to implement change. You earn the respect of staff members by acknowledging that they know the school better than you do and that you consider their professional insights important enough to you that they will become your first order of business in bringing change to the school.

- Change must be paced so that the staff and the school community can absorb it. Emotionally, people can adjust only to a certain amount of change in a given time frame. Trying to implement major changes too quickly or too many changes at once can overwhelm many of your staff. Determining the right pacing of changes requires consistent communication and careful listening to those who will feel the impact of the changes.

- Communication is one of the most essential ingredients in implementing successful changes in your school. Many excellent proposals and innovations may fail, not because they weren't good ideas but because the process did not include adequate communication with those affected by the changes. There must be thorough communication with all relevant groups in the school community when determining when and where changes need to take place, when deciding what those changes should be, and throughout the entire process of implementing the changes. Competent communication is always a crucial and indispensable ingredient of any organization, but the importance of communication is significantly magnified during times of organizational change.

In summary, change is inevitable, challenging, and positive for your school. Embrace change because it is a vehicle for improvement. Utilize vision to proactively select the changes that will help you carry out the mission of your school. Carefully consider the cost and impact of proposed changes. If you are a new head administrator dealing with organizational change, move carefully and slowly to help ensure a positive response. And finally, realize that thorough communication is absolutely essential to any process of change.

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Jesus Christ never changes. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). But schools change continuously. May God give you wisdom and grace to lead your school through consistent change as you continue to remain firmly anchored in our unchangeable Lord.

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