

The Christian School Lifecycle

Understanding how to govern your school as a Board and lead it as a Principal / Head of School includes technical knowledge, strategic thinking, people management, and leadership principles. All of these are, however, situated within the context of the school's own journey as an organization. In other words, the answer to the question: what should we do? Is not necessarily the same for a two year old school as for a 12 year old or a 24 year old school. The school as an organization has a lifecycle that Boards and Principals / Heads of School do well to pay attention to.

The four stages of the Christian school's lifecycle are diagrammed on the next page in more technical language. Here, we summarize each stage in a few more colloquial words identifying both positives and obstacles:

The Enthusiastic Christian School (entrepreneurial) 0-10 years

Positives: the beginning of a school is attended by a can-do attitude, an appreciation for and a seeking for 'miracle', significant prayer, very little pride in the sense that everyone does everything, few resources and thus very little kingdom building, parents are forgiving.

Challenges: there are no or few routines and so everything becomes an adventure and time consuming as the professionals and volunteers figure it out on the go, many things are done by people not truly qualified to do them from teaching to book-keeping to coaching to fund-raising.

The Confident Christian School (adolescent) 10-15 years

Positives: leadership is more balanced as resources increase, handbooks are in place and some rituals have become 'tradition', the Board is less concerned about keeping the doors open on a day to day basis and more interested in a longer vision, the action of the school is professionalized.

Challenges: 2nd generation of parents are transactional in approach, 2nd generation of employees are interested in how much they get paid and in their own future, prayer can drift into the background, too much awareness of competition from other Christian and secular schools and thus mission drift, the feeling that 'we've made it' and don't need to go to the next stage

The Inspired Christian School (mature) 15-30+ years

Positives: all areas of the school are operating professionally, the Board understands and enacts its strategic role, finances are positive, parents believe in the longevity of the school and commit in appropriate ways, employees are committed to the mission of the school, there is interest in growth and no fear of questions, faith is mature and steady.

Challenges: pressure to 'improve' the school in ways that do not contribute to the mission, comfort replaces challenge as a norm, kingdoms spring up as prosperity and success change perspectives, reliance on the Lord can become sanctimonious, listening to students and parents and responding can be considered unprofessional.

The Proud Christian School (dying) 20+ years

Positives: none

Challenges: overweening confidence leads to a culture of speaking and not listening, faith becomes empty words and practice, 'this is the way we've always done it' replaces the call to action, ambition to beat the school down the road overwhelms the impulse to community, internal kingdoms struggle for pre-eminence, the Board moves away from the mission as the reason for action, continuing success makes the school look good even as the foundation is being destroyed. (Where the Founder is still at the helm, the school suffers from Founder's Syndrome – the original vision burns brightly but it unable to adapt to changing circumstances and the Founder's skills are no longer relevant to emerging needs).

Discussion

It is important to note that schools cannot avoid going through the first stage. If they do not move out of the enthusiastic stage, the school goes out of business. It essentially fails to create an administrative and financial model that can stand leadership transition and meet the needs of a growing institution. It fails to harness the enthusiasm of the original can-do group to develop sustainable practices that underpin culture and ensure that it remains healthy over time. The school either moves to confidence or it fails. At the same time, the enthusiastic stage can't be short-circuited. The skills needed to get an organization going are not the same as those needed to keep it going. They can be summarized as: deep faith in a generous and miraculous God, initiative and self-direction, risk-taking, flexibility and adaptability, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, the ability to see opportunities, marshal resources and create value. These attributes can, of course, be valuable at every stage of an organization's lifecycle. In the start up stage, they are critical and dominant.

Once the school has moved to the second stage of confidence or adolescence, the problem becomes one of success. It actually does work and can work for decades. It is possible to stay in the adolescent stage for a long time because students and parents are reasonably happy, you can see growth, the finances have stabilized, the Board is supportive. The problem is that a school stuck at this stage can never be more than mediocre. There may be flashes of brilliance due to an individual's extraordinary talent, but the school itself, the underlying structures, the sustainability, all are mediocre. If such a talent is there at the school, if it leaves, the brilliance goes with it. Often, schools in this stage try to continue the program but it never shines again and the students drift away from it. The adolescent stage also betrays an enthusiasm for the Lord but with little depth. Philip Yancey talks about the child/adult/parent faith journey where the adult would align with the adolescent organization stage – a more mature belief but still fundamentally self-centered as the adolescent school is. Scott Peck talks of the Formal-Institutional (stage II) where faith is binary, lacking the mystical depths of later maturity. In faith as in organizational growth, the adolescent stage fears the questioning and the nuanced boundaries that a richer and deeper organization and faith both possess. And so mediocrity reigns. It is easy to see how such a school is thrown off center by external events such as economic downturns when the mediocrity is questioned and rejected by the customer.

If the school can transition through to the inspired / mature stage, it can truly release the potential of its students and its people. Few schools truly trust their children and excellence cannot be achieved until the children are considered full members of the community. A mature school, rather like a mature faith, has the freedom to have the unbridled enthusiasm of the entrepreneur, the clear boundaries of the adolescent, and the ability to transcend those boundaries and seek new horizons of maturity. The school moves from self-centeredness to generosity, seeking always to benefit the other, and truly loving the neighbor as oneself. Faith in this scenario is so deeply believing and founded so well that it is no longer dogmatic. The school is so secure in its people and culture and structures that it welcomes the alternate viewpoint and diverse voices around the table. This is the confidence that supports everyone in being better and assumes that excellence is always the norm to be achieved. Such a school weathers external calamity with minimal impact, and even internal controversy is not enough to throw it off balance.

Organizational theory then dictates that the danger of hubris is ever present and can lead the school down the slope of pride / death. Leadership begins to believe that it is infallible and begins to choke of questioning and dissent. Students and parents become irritants and are externalized, sometimes to the extent of virtually becoming the enemy. Phrases such as “I wish parents would just stay out of our business” or “students today just want everything handed to them” are evidence that pride is taking over. Of course, such phrases can exist at any stage but they are meant seriously at the pride stage when the reason for the school effectively becomes, not the school’s mission, but the comfort and convenience of the adults in the building. Pride turns faith into lip service, philanthropy into greed, enrollment into public relations, governance into privilege, and servant leadership into dominance leadership.

Schools can use the lifecycle paradigm to interrogate the school’s realities during strategic planning, accreditation visits, departmental or divisional reviews, leadership retreats at all levels of the school. It will become evident that different parts of the organization are at different stages of development showing that there has been uneven growth. The job of leadership at the Board and Principal / Head of School level is to bring all areas of the school’s operations to the highest level and keep moving to the Inspired / mature stage. If one area of the school is left behind, the rest of the school will not be able to progress optimally. Ultimately it will drag the rest of the school down. At the same time, once the school is strong enough to be at the inspired / mature stage, the job of Board and Principal/Head of School leadership is to look for, identify, and nip in the bud signs of pride that will lead the school out of excellence and down to death.

This is not theoretical: we have seen thousands of Christian schools close over the past decade and more. Most have been at the adolescent stage and unable to withstand a sudden shock. A few have been at the inspired moving to proud stage and unable to save the school from itself. The lifecycle is an important tool to help keep the school headed in the right direction. CSM suggests that it be used once a year at the Board’s annual retreat, and/or once a year at the leadership team’s annual retreat. It could even be used as a whole school exercise once a planning cycle (every four years). Doing this would give permission for hidden conversations to become visible, contribute to the health of the school, and ensure that the word ‘Christian’ remains vibrant in the lives of children, parents, volunteers, Board, and employees.

The Enthusiastic Christian School 0 – 10 years (entrepreneurial)

The miracle of God's grace is readily identified
Everyone pitches in
Few routines or clearly identified policies
Do what works and "today" are most important
Deep parent involvement that is missional
Board is operational
Finances are year to year if not day to day
Philanthropy is event based
No reserves plus debt to get going
Faculty are enthusiastic and pitch in

The Confident Christian School 10 – 15 years (adolescent)

'Miracles' are complemented with responsible action
God's goodness is seen in deeper ways
Professionals take over from volunteers
Routines and policies established
Parents become more transactional
Board moves towards being strategic
The first Strategic Plan
Finances are stabilized
Philanthropy moves to annual giving from events
Faculty become organized and develop teams

The Inspired Christian School 15 – 30+ years (mature)

Christian leaders demonstrate mature judgment
God is seen as incarnation and resurrection and parousia
Professionals and volunteers are proactive partners
Routines and policies are routinely questioned
Parents are taught and enact their role
Board operates through a generative Strategic Plan and Strategic Financial Management
Finances are mature with reserves and a healthy budget fully funding program and compensation
Annual Giving is mature, and philanthropy includes capital, major, and endowment / planned giving

Faculty act as and expect to be treated and paid like professionals

The Proud Christian School 20+ years (dying)

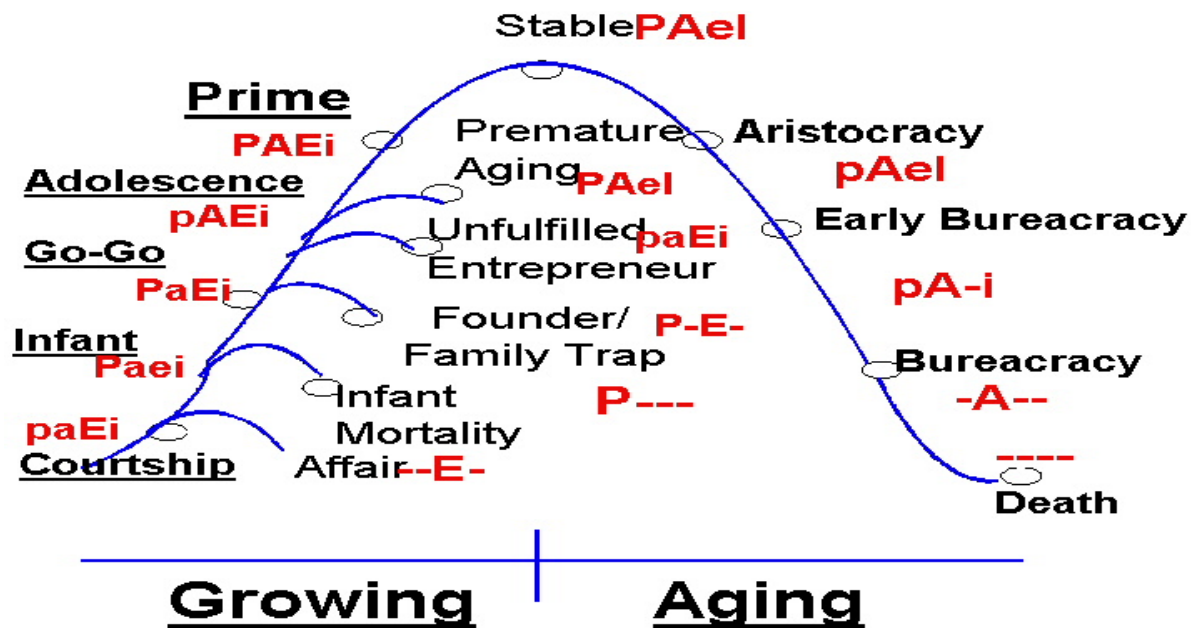
Holy language replaces faithful action
God becomes an excuse for not interrogating reality
Professionals please parents rather than carry out the mission
Change / reinvention is replaced with "we've always done it this way"
Parents begin to doubt the value of the school
Board looks backwards rather than forwards
Finances become an end rather than a means
Philanthropy is pointed towards safety rather than growth
Faculty are adult-centered and insist students meet them where the faculty are

Appendix: This diagram represents a common way to illustrate corporate lifecycles, developed by Ichak Adizes in 1988 and still used today. It has 10 stages and, of course, relates to the corporate need to maximize shareholder return. Nonetheless, it is instructive to see and to recognize how many businesses actually do decline and fail. The Small Business Administration says that 50% of new businesses fail in the first two years. Over 87% of Fortune 500 companies in 1955 are no longer with us. As a caveat, the SBA says that failure does not seem to be connected to a good or a bad economy – also true of our Christian schools. The state of the economy does not predict success. It is the organization's practices that predict success.

Cultures: PAEI

Source: "Corporate Lifecycles" - Ichak Adizes 1988

P=Producer, A=Administrator, E=Entrepreneur, I=Integrator



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CSM Mission: For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students

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