



Lorcan's Top "Ten" Lessons Learned as a Catholic High School President

Note...these are **not** in order of importance.

1. If you don't have a supportive spouse, get a dog.

- Leadership is lonely. And one can't truly understand until it's too late.
- If the extreme conservatives and the extreme liberals are both mad at you, you're probably on the right track.
- Do you want to be liked or respected? You can't please everyone.

2. Pick where you park your Prius.

- I learned part of this from the president of a large college. He had MS, yet he always parked far from the building even when the lot was empty. Employees are less likely to complain about aloof administration when the president is willing to walk.
- Potential donors and tuition paying parents don't want to see the president driving a luxury car. The way you spend *your* money tells them how you'll spend *their* tuition dollar or *their* donation dollar. The president's car should not be the most expensive car in the faculty parking lot.

3. Others see *power*, you see *responsibility*.

- Leaders who can't say, "I don't know," "I'm sorry," or "I messed up" won't last.
- Push the broom, fold the chairs, turn out the lights.
- If adults fight over control of money and public credit for a project, students generally lose. Alumni and parent support groups have to recognize that any donation to benefit the school is the CEO's responsibility. And CEOs need to be flexible sometimes and throw support groups a bone so they feel valued.
- Mind your adjectives. Don't say "*my* principal," "*my* director of facilities," etc. These are people, not possessions. Using language like "*our* principal" or "*the school's* director of facilities" changes everything.



4. **Faculty morale is a constant.**

- Most schools “used to be a community” and now they “feel corporate.”
- Positive teachers set the cultural tone of the school. Unfortunately, the converse can be true as well.
- The first few years of a teacher’s career are viewed through rose-colored glasses.
- “In-group/Out-group” divisions are morale killers. It takes a village and you’re the mayor.
- Employees want more *communication*, but fewer emails and meetings.
- Don’t ever say a teacher “just works ten months.” That’s deeply offensive.
- High school drama is not limited to students.

5. **Don’t rush the hire, don’t delay the fire.**

- Once your gut says s/he’s probably not the right person for the job, separate ASAP.
- Don’t be nice and hope for a soft landing.
- “At will” ... generally isn’t.
- Employees who leave on their own typically leave with their dignity.
- Good teachers don’t necessarily make good administrators.
- Management is both art and science. And it’s difficult.
- If you want to know who your weak teachers are ... ask the students and teachers. Every school has weak teachers. Good schools move ‘em up or out.
- Most people who criticize the timing or the communication surrounding an employment separation have never had to fire someone.

6. **Trend lines aren’t pretty.**

- The tuition-driven business model is not sustainable long-term. Could a for-profit company survive if its competitors got a 100% government subsidy?
- Faith practices are in alarming decline. 40-year-olds don’t go to church. We have to inspire them to choose Catholic schools. It’s a real win when a family’s experience in a Catholic school brings them back to the church.
- In the eyes of far too many, the Catholic church has lost its moral authority. The “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” that Catholic schools enjoyed in previous generations is losing its luster.
- We *can* bend the trend lines in our favor with creative thinking, hard work, and bold leadership!



7. “That’ll never happen” ... eventually will.

- Interview a crisis PR Firm consultant before the crisis. That means now.
- Succession planning is *your* responsibility.
- Competent, ethical presidents *can* get fired. All it takes is one scandal or one powerful constituency.

8. No one cares about the Board of Trustees ... until they *really* care.

- The governance model is less important than the people sitting around the table.
- Trustees are responsible for vision, but they’re not typically educators. Trustees evaluate your job performance, but they haven’t done your job. This can be frustrating ... BUT. There are wonderful trustees who understand leadership and care about your mission. Good trustees are encouraging and honest.
- Parents and some teachers assume it’s like a public-school board. They want another avenue to express a grievance if they don’t like the president’s decision.

9. Fundraising is an art and a science ... and everyone’s an expert.

- Today’s *donors* were inspired by yesterday’s teachers. Today’s *students* are tomorrow’s donors. In other words, good teachers are critical ingredients to successful long-term fundraising.
- Catholics have been trained in the bake sale model, not the tithing model.
- It’s difficult to raise funds for a struggling organization. People want to support a thriving organization that’s making a difference. Survival is not compelling.
- Board members expect the staff (CEO and Director of Advancement) to raise money. Staff needs the board to make philanthropy a priority and to connect the school to donors. Strong, sustainable schools see fundraising as a *both/and*.
- Consultants add both real value and perceived value, but only if you follow their advice and hold them accountable for results.

10. “Parents are the primary educators.”

- Don’t assume a child will be like her/his parents ... for better or for worse.
- Some parents think they’re experts because *they* went to school, and they turned out OK. You and your staff are the professional educators even though the parents are the primary educators. Like most things, it’s about communication and trust ... and it’s not easy.
- If you want parents to show up to a meeting, tell them it’s about college athletic scholarships.



- 11. Organizational power and influence can be inversely proportional to one's title.**
 - Facilities and support staff are critical! Ask for their thoughts and listen to their answers! You have blind spots. They'll share observations about your school that you hadn't even thought of ... and often the fixes are simple.
 - An exceptional, trusted administrative assistant is priceless.

- 12. You think your school is unique ... until you look around.**
 - Religious orders are like a face. We all have ears, eyes, nose, mouth, etc., but we look different.
 - Stop naval gazing! We can learn from "them." Other schools (public, private, charter) have great programs too.
 - Every school has a few aggravating teachers. As long as these teachers inspire students, the CEO should just take an aspirin to deal with the headache. Good administrators spend time with positive teachers.

- 13. Either the teacher evaluation process is hated ... or ... there's a committee in place to review the model.**
 - The *format* is secondary to the *forum*. If the principal and the assistant principal are trusted and willing to provide constructive criticism in a fair and consistent manner, then just about any format will do.
 - Teaching is deeply personal. Different teaching styles are successful with different students. But that doesn't recuse the principal from determining which teachers are worthy of our students and when we need to search for better teachers.

- 14. If dress code enforcement is a problem at your school, count your blessings.**
 - Social standards are constantly changing. Teenagers are hard-wired to push boundaries. There will always be tension between freedom of expression and tradition/modesty.
 - Parents want discipline ... until *their* kid gets in trouble. Then they want compassion.
 - Expulsion and public scorn are the only acceptable consequences to the family of a bullied student. It's difficult for administrators to determine culpability and assign consequences in a hot kitchen.
 - The real problems that threaten sustainability of mission are (a) enrollment, (b) the ability to attract and retain excellent teachers, and (c) apathy. Let the dean deal with dress code but don't expect everyone to like it.



15. If the product isn't good enough for a family of means, it shouldn't be good enough for a low-income student.

- The quality of education and the overall school experience has to be good enough for wealthy people to want it. Then you raise money to provide access to low- and modest-income families.

16. Nobody understands your job.

- You're the *owner*, not the *manager*.
- Many teachers just want you to raise money and leave day-to-day operations alone. They don't give much thought to what you do until it's time to discuss salaries, benefits, and class sizes.
- Some alumni think you're the president of the *alumni association*. "We didn't need a president in 1965. Why do we need one now?"
- Some parents and students think you work for the principal ... if they think about you at all.
- Let the alumni tell you how it used to be, even if you've heard the same story 100 times. "It's *always* been this way" = their 4 years of high school.

17. "You should run the school like a business."

- Trustees and business people want the CEO to identify *alternative revenue sources*. If it was that easy, all schools would be doing it ... as would any capitalist.
- Trustees want to hire an *entrepreneurial leader who is innovative*. Most entrepreneurs fail a couple of times before they make it. Are trustees willing to risk the mission?
- Some educators dismiss *businesspeople* because "they don't understand." Some businesspeople dismiss educators because "they don't live in the real world." The CEO's job is to lead *both* parties to common ground that will advance the mission.
- Employees who say, "we're not a business" might think differently if they show up to the doctor and realize their medical insurance wasn't paid.
- No money, no mission.

18. Sometimes you get lucky.

- Don't underestimate the power of a weak opponent. Blunders by your competitors can make *you* look smart. Stay focused on promoting *your* school's brand so that you pull ahead when your competitors stumble.
- Estate gifts secured 20 years before you arrived can make *you* look brilliant! Your job is to make someone else look brilliant 20 years from now.



19. **Decisive Leadership vs. Collaborative Leadership**

- People like decisive leaders who decide in *their* favor. People like collaborative leaders as long as *their* position is embraced.
- You can't please all the people all of the time. Decisions typically involve which constituents you please *this time*.
- The decisions you make can be weighty one minute and minutia the next minute. No one will ever know.

20. **Schools don't need two principals.**

- The president doesn't need to be in the cafeteria or at the track meet. The principal doesn't need to attend alumni activities and community events. The Venn diagram of overlapping responsibilities should look more like a pair of glasses than a monocle.
- Parents and teachers should think twice before taking their grievance to the president. Back up the principal until s/he gives you reason to question her/his judgement. (If you don't trust the principal's judgement, see #5 above.)
- Discuss boundary issues before they become problematic. Yes, it's ALL the president's sandbox, but you need the principal to feel a sense of ownership of his/her sandbox. Treat the principal like you want the Board of Trustees to treat you.
- You can't say, "I miss the classroom." You have to be OK drawing your professional reward four steps from the magic (teacher/student connection, learning, growth, etc.)

21. **PRAYER WORKS.**

Lorcan Barnes served as president of Christian Brothers High School (Sacramento, CA) from 2004 – 2020. Prior to that he served as President of Chaminade-Julienne High School (Dayton, OH) from 1996 – 2004 and as Assistant to the President of Loyola High School (Los Angeles, CA) from 1991 – 1996. He is currently president and owner of Lester Consulting Group, Inc. (www.lcginc.net) whose mission it is "to advance the standards and practice of effective management and philanthropy" among nonprofit organizations.

