

Spotlight

The role of school leadership in challenging times

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The key messages in this Spotlight reveal that in times of crisis effective leaders:

- ⚡ draw on a toolkit of skills and approaches, which are reactive and proactive
- ⚡ prioritise open communication
- ⚡ proactively triage and manage threats to their community
- ⚡ leverage expertise and experience from multiple stakeholders to facilitate transition from a crisis
- ⚡ work collaboratively to transform and build back better
- ⚡ support the wellbeing of their school community (while maintaining their own health and wellbeing)

Introduction

While significant, the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to be the last crisis we will face in our lifetime, and it's not the first time that school leaders have been called upon to lead through times of ambiguity. Challenges faced by school leaders have ranged from rebuilding after

environmental disasters through to supporting communities through economic, social and emotional devastation. During these times, school leaders have provided clarity and direction, built resilience and instilled hope as they remained focused on the best possible outcomes for their students and school communities.

So far in 2020 we have experienced bushfires, drought and COVID-19. In the midst of this pandemic, there is evidence emerging across the globe of the critical role that leadership plays in steering communities through the challenges we are all facing.

This *Spotlight* summarises the evidence base of leadership required during challenging times, examines the practices of successful leadership through uncertainty and highlights learnings from previous crises.

Leading through uncertainty

Leading through uncertainty can be daunting - there are no easy solutions, and often no clear paths to follow. How do we lead when we can't predict what's going to happen next? Uncertainty requires leaders to adapt quickly to a rapidly changing situation, and to draw on different skills and types of leadership. When faced with uncertainty, school leaders need to deal with the immediate, while remaining focused on the future, to achieve the best possible teaching and learning environment, and outcomes for students.

Some activities differentiate effective leaders from the rest of the crowd when faced with adversity. What is required is a proactive, inclusive and transparent approach that does not downplay information or delay a response (Kerrissey and Edmondson 2020).

Overcoming instincts to lead effectively through uncertainty

What's instinctive when facing uncertainty

What's needed in a crisis

Waiting for additional information

Acting with urgency

Downplaying the threat and withholding bad news

Communicating with transparency

Doubling down to explain your actions more clearly

Taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems

Staying the course

Engaging in constant updating

Which leadership skills and approaches are effective?

Effective leaders, like effective teachers, adjust and draw on a range of skills and approaches depending on the context. A typical school day requires leaders to move from authority figure to teammate, to coach, to therapist, navigating through a range of roles as each demand arises. An ability to shift and adjust leadership approaches based on what is needed is key to being effective as a leader.

Leading through change requires a broad range of capabilities including non-behavioural, non-practice-related components of leadership which influence the nature of leadership behaviour and practices. In the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*, these are referred to as Leadership Requirements and influence the effectiveness with which the Leadership Practices are enacted. These requirements recognise the importance of skills which help leaders build relationships and deal with ambiguity. Two overall messages stand out in the research into effective leadership in times of uncertainty – having the right tools for the task and the importance of context.

Quick Link

To find out more about the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, visit <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/australian-professional-standard-for-principals>

1. The right tools for the task

A common leadership analogy is that of an expert golfer who draws on a wide range of tools, in the form of various woods, irons and putters, to best meet the conditions under which they are playing. While an inexperienced or first-time golfer may pull out of their golf bag a club they've used before, the skilled golfer will draw on their knowledge, skills and experience to choose the best club for the situation (Goleman 2000). Leaders have various tools available. With practice, leaders learn how to use each tool, and become aware of the best approach to draw on in a particular situation. The more familiar leaders are with different approaches, styles and skills; the more sophisticated they become in using them.

Adaptive leadership

Adaptive or complex challenges can be approached in multiple ways, often with multiple solutions and usually require changes in numerous areas. Adaptive leadership requires collaborative problem solving, continual learning and adaptation, the leveraging of multiple perspectives and shared leadership responsibilities (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano 2018).

Six key adaptive leadership practices

- **Get a clearer view:** Broaden one's perspective to better understand the bigger picture and accurately assess the situation.
- **Identify the challenge:** Identify the underlying adaptive challenges facing the organisation.
- **Regulate stress:** Develop a holding environment where stakeholders feel safe to express their opinions.
- **Maintain disciplined attention:** Stay focused on the task at hand.
- **Give the work back to the people:** Guide and empower teams to come up with creative and innovative solutions.
- **Protect leadership voices from below:** Listen to all viewpoints, including those who might ordinarily be overshadowed in the process (Heifetz & Laurie 2001).

2. Context matters

Every crisis is different – while some have acute effects, other crises may be experienced over a longer period. Consistent across crises is the importance of context. The evidence base about contextual influences on school leadership practices has expanded significantly in the last decade and highlights the importance of being responsive to context.

The ways in which leaders apply...basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2020).

Effective school leaders understand and respond appropriately to the different contextual demands that they face. Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) note that while practices of transformational and instructional leadership are often dichotomised - successful leaders combine practices in different ways across different phases of their school's development.

Resource list

Recent literature on leading through complexity

A case for reimagining school leadership development to enhance collective efficacy.

Elliott & Hollingsworth 2020

This paper reviews the school leadership literature about the characteristics of effective school leaders, and focuses on the Australian context, recognising that the work of school leaders is increasing in complexity.

🔗 https://research.acer.edu.au/educational_leadership/5

A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reimers & Schleicher 2020

An OECD guide to support education decision making during a pandemic, based on a rapid assessment of education needs and emerging responses in 98 countries.

🔗 <https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/>

School leadership: Using evidence to manage change in a pandemic.

Schoeffel & Ho 2020

Even under 'normal' circumstances, change is a difficult process to lead. How can schools implement change effectively and efficiently in these times?

🔗 <https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/school-leadership-using-evidence-to-manage-change-in-a-pandemic>

The 3Ts - A phased approach to leading through crisis

A crisis is defined as a difficult or dangerous situation that requires immediate and decisive action. Crises are not the normal recurring challenges that schools experience on a day-to-day basis. Rather, crises are usually 'confronting, intrusive and painful experiences' (Smith & Riley 2012, p. 53), at least for some members of the school community. Crises of one form or another will inevitably occur in all schools, no matter how well the school is led.

There is no neat blueprint for leadership in such times, no pre-determined roadmap, no simple leadership checklist of things to tick off (Harris 2020).

The critical attributes of school leadership in times of crisis include:

- The ability to cope and thrive on ambiguity.
- Decisive decision making and an ability to respond flexibly and quickly and to change direction rapidly if required.
- A strong capacity to think creatively and laterally and question events in new and insightful ways.
- The tenacity and optimism to persevere when all seems to be lost.
- An ability to work with and through people to achieve critical outcomes, synthesising information, empathising with others and remaining respectful.
- Strong communication and media skills (Smith & Riley 2012).

Lessons from other sectors suggest that breaking down the broader challenge into phases may help leaders move forward without becoming overwhelmed by the scale of the problem.

In this way, the **3Ts** is a framework that may be useful for schools: *Triage, Transition, Transform* (Lenhoff et al. 2019). The 3Ts can be used to reflect on a crisis situation, both during and after the event. This framework is not linear, for example, while moving through a later phase (transform), leaders may also be helping others in an earlier phase of the crisis (transition). The value of this model is to provide a lens for understanding the types of challenges leaders may face at each phase of a crisis.

1. Triage

Triage refers to an initial sorting process on the basis of urgency. The task in the immediate onset of a crisis is to separate the now from the later. At this stage, adrenaline is high, there are plenty of practical things to take care of, and the leadership approach most likely to be selected from the school leader's toolkit is authoritative leadership. Taking decisive action, the focus is on safety and wellbeing for everyone who is immediately affected. For school leaders this could mean rapidly sharing up-to-date government advice to school communities and proactively implementing changes in their schools.

Accounts from schools directly involved in the Canterbury earthquake in New Zealand, show school leaders taking control while remaining focused on creating a calm atmosphere.

Leaders in schools and early childhood services became role models for others. If the leaders stayed calm, then children, staff and parents were more likely to remain safe and calm (Education Review Office (ERO) 2013, p. 1).

While ensuring physical safety is the absolute first priority, psychological safety is also important. People need to feel safe to ask questions, raise concerns, and propose ideas. Transparency and open communication help build a better understanding of the full picture.

Transparency is 'job one' for leaders in a crisis. Be clear what you know, what you don't know, and what you are doing to learn more (Edmonson 2020).

Transitioning from the triage stage, and carrying learnings forward, requires strong leadership. A key consideration for education leaders at this point is how to ensure learning continuity.

2. Transition

Once lockdown or evacuation is over, and people's basic physical and security needs have been attended to, the leader's focus is to increase stability, and reduce uncertainty for teachers, other school staff, students and their families.

The phase of transition is about adopting new ways of working and being, be it for a short time or a more extended period. After immediate responses to dangers or threats have been actioned, communities are often adjusting to new approaches. This may involve a dispersed school community, or a move to relocatable buildings, as well as replacing lost materials. For example, in the context of the current pandemic, this phase has involved a combination of remote learning and a transition back to socially distanced classrooms.

A further example can be drawn from the school closures in Hong Kong during the protests in 2019. David Lovelin from Hong Kong International High School provided the following leadership advice for managing such a crisis (Jacobs and Zmuda 2020):

- Establish a crisis management team.
- Use talent within your school community.
- Identify key common technology platforms for communication.

This advice, born out of this Principal's experience, reinforces the evidence-base on effective leadership through change, which emphasises the importance of teams and communication.

Mobilising teams and expertise

The complexity of the challenges leaders face demands solutions that reach beyond one individual. Rather than looking to individuals to solve problems, people increasingly recognise that effective solutions come from networks and other collaborations (Jensen, Downing & Clark 2017, p. 20).

Leading through complexity requires working together to draw on the collective wisdom of the group to find solutions to the challenges presented. A collective approach to leadership is essential for the sustainability and wellbeing of leaders, teachers, schools and the broader education system. Distributed leadership is an approach that recognises multiple people influence improvement in a school, including middle leaders (Harris & Spillane 2008). A growing body of evidence on the power of shared leadership has found that it:

1. Creates a more democratic organisation.
2. Provides more significant opportunities for collective learning.
3. Provides opportunities for teacher development.
4. Increases the school's capacity to respond intelligently to the many and complex challenges it faces (Leithwood 2012).

Collective impact

When working through complexity, leaders can mobilise their teams by setting clear priorities for the response and empowering others to discover and implement solutions that serve those priorities (D'Auria & De Smet 2020). This requires fostering collective and collaborative leadership capacity and acknowledging the impact of the collective. Collective impact is recognised in the area of social impact as a collaborative approach to addressing complex social issues (Kania & Kramer 2011; Cabaj & Weaver 2016). There are five conditions that produce alignment and move people from isolated agendas, measurements and activities to a collective approach and impact:

- A common agenda.
- Shared measurement.
- Mutually reinforcing activities.

- Continuous communication.
- Backbone support.

Leadership in a crisis should be collaborative but should also look to be sensibly hierarchical. There are times when school leaders need to wait and take advice from government, system-level leaders and first responders. Within the school, a well-formed crisis management team brings a cross-section of perspectives to a problem, and reduces the risk of missing certain voices.

Some in the school community have specific expertise and leadership responsibilities because of their role. Staff with professional qualifications beyond education such as the school counsellor, psychologist, nurse or chaplain, and information and resource specialists in the school's library have additional skills to contribute in such situations. Information technology staff become heroes when remote schooling scenarios come into play, and cleaners and facilities staff bear the brunt of restoring sites post-disaster. Supporting the supporters is a key element of a school's emergency management and recovery plan (Whitla 2003). Tapping into expertise and influencers in the parent body, local personalities and networks can also support the school's leadership team.

Clear and open communication

Communication is vital. In the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquake, New Zealand leaders highlighted their need for communications systems that operate when people have no access to an office, school computer or power (ERO 2013). In an information age, the issue leaders face is often not a lack of information, but an overwhelming amount. The apparent wealth of communication channels can actually hinder free flow of vital information. In the same way we look to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as our national emergency services broadcaster, schools that establish a common, official communication channel, and ensure up front that everyone in the school community can access this readily, are better equipped when the need arises.

Clear, simple and frequent communication is imperative to sharing up-to-date information and maintaining open communication channels. In fact, school leaders, who are themselves a key communication channel may benefit from media training (Smith & Riley 2012). Both verbal and written communication are important. In a school context this includes newsletters, assemblies and information sessions for lengthier communications, and the use of instant messaging systems, quick pulse surveys, daily staff meetings or bulletins, and wellbeing check ins.

3. Transform

Rebuilding school communities after major disruption and trauma requires a rethinking of social capital, resilience, of space, individuals' roles and their contributions (Nye 2016, p. 88).

Leading the recovery of a school community after a crisis involves a delicate balancing act. Key findings from the aftermath of crises such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Canterbury earthquake suggests that for schools, recovery may be less about minimising the loss

of student learning time and more about the role schools play in emotional and social recovery, which can minimise longer term health concerns (Hattie 2020). During this phase the needs of those impacted by the crisis must be sensitively balanced with the community's (staff, students and parents) desire to return as quickly as possible to business as usual routines.

Through this phase of transformation, schools may act as:

- community drop-in and re-bonding centres.
- pastoral care and agency hubs for staff, students, and families.
- frontline screening to identify community members experiencing severe effects.
- facilitators of appropriate recovery services (Mutch 2014).

Rebuilding during the transformation phase provides an opportunity for leaders to adapt “flexibly and strategically to changes in the environment, in order to secure the ongoing improvement of the school” (*Professional Practice: Leading improvement, innovation and change*, AITSL 2014, p. 17). In this phase, schools have a chance to refocus, re-energise and try new ideas (Smith & Riley 2012, p. 64). This involves learning and growing from the experience, and possibly experimenting with a new vision, values and culture. In this way, the recovery period can become an opportunity for transformation – to ‘build back better’ (BBB) by integrating disaster reduction and management strategies into the ‘restoration’ and ‘revitalisation’ of systems and communities to build resilience for future crises (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery n.d.; United Nations General Assembly 2016). For example, the current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that rebuilding is not only about physical infrastructure, but about the health, safety and wellbeing of individuals and school communities.

Determining what has worked and what hasn't and deciding what to cut, keep or further develop are key considerations to support learning and growth following a crisis. That is, the period of transformation is also about retaining any successful new practice that emerged during the crisis, to build the ‘new normal.’ An important role for school leaders in this process is to broker agreement on what ‘building back better’ or the ‘new normal’ should look like, ensuring it centres on the needs of students (Mutch 2014). Taking the time to reflect and learn from a critical incident is, therefore, an valuable exercise, both in terms of ensuring the school leader's voice is part of the review that will inevitably follow a crisis or incident, and as an optimal time to revisit a school's disaster/crisis policies (Myors 2013).

Resource list

Literature on learnings from a crisis

Riding the wave: An exploration of principals' experiences leading their schools through and beyond critical incidents.

Myors 2013

Research based on school leaders' responses to the question: What was your experience as you led your school during and after a critical incident?

🔗 <https://doi.org/10.4226/66/5a963327c68af>

Schools as Communities and for Communities: Learning From the 2010–2011 New Zealand Earthquakes.

Mutch 2016

This study of school leaders following the 2010/2011 Canterbury earthquakes provides the opportunity to reflect on their role in crisis contexts. It considers physical, social, emotional, psychological needs of staff, students and families.

🔗 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1104398.pdf>

Crisis management and the school community.

Whitla 2003

This book offers practical response and recovery procedures for school leaders dealing with emergencies, both within the school and in the larger community. It combines theory and practice and provides guidelines for managing response and recovery procedures; understanding the grieving process; developing people management and leadership skills; communicating appropriately; including staff and students in the recovery process; and coping better with future crises.

🔗 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/8165189>

Supporting wellbeing during a crisis

The wellbeing of school leaders themselves, their teaching staff as well as students and communities is critical across all phases of a crisis. Wellbeing encompasses physical, mental and social health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a, “a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO 2018). Wellbeing is central to workforce productivity and an important precondition of effective teaching and learning. Effective leaders know that circumstances call upon them to provide a holding environment where people feel safe and to provide them with some sense of certainty during uncertainty. There is a growing evidence base of actions that help to take care of yourself and others through challenging times.

Taking care of yourself

There's a reason why the crew on a plane will ask you to fit your own mask before attending to others. To take care of others, it's important to expend energy inwards as well. Engaging in practices that give you energy, lower your stress and contribute to your wellbeing is crucial to taking care of yourself.

Evidence indicates that successful wellbeing interventions include:

- Reflection strategies for insight into professional practice.

- Mindfulness training to manage stress.
- Emotional management strategies.
- Growth mindset approaches to solving problems.
- Self-care practices to restore when needed.
- Celebrate achievements and success to feel valued (McCallum et al. 2017).

While it can be difficult to look after yourself when faced with adversity and you are busy looking after others some methods include being kind to yourself, providing some time to pause, acknowledging your own feelings and stress and that it's okay and acceptable to reach out to others for support.

Staying connected

A sense of connectedness and belonging is key to wellbeing. School leaders play a critical role in building a positive learning environment where the whole school community feels included, connected, safe and respected (Australian Student Wellbeing Framework 2018). Communicating early and often during a crisis can help alleviate concern, provide opportunities for people to be heard and mitigate the potential effects of isolation and distance.

The importance of students feeling connected to others and experiencing safe and trusting relationships is critical to their wellbeing. School connectedness is a significant protective factor for wellbeing and has been associated with positive mental health and academic outcomes (Cahill, Beadle, Farrelly, Forester & Smith 2014). Adopting a resilience mindset is important to promoting wellbeing during uncertainty. Key predictors of wellbeing and resilience are centred around feeling *Connected*, *Protected* and *Respected* or 'CPR' (Fuller & Wicking 2017). This can be fostered by reaching out to people, asking if they are okay (*connected*), providing safe places to discuss ideas and feelings (*protected*) and acknowledging that people react and cope differently (*respected*).

Effective leaders work with their staff so that the school has an understanding of what trauma is and how to recognise possible signs of it. This is key to continual wellbeing and supporting others through a crisis. Resources on managing wellbeing through uncertainty and trauma informed practice in schools are important (Griffiths, Stevens & Treleaven 2020; Whitla 2003).

Relationships are key during a crisis and afford opportunities for tighter bonds between schools, parents, carers and communities. Through open communication, transparency and working together the current pandemic has provided opportunities for greater parent and carer understanding and empathy for the work of teachers and schools and vice versa and presented an opportunity to consolidate, and even strengthen communication strategies and structures.

Resource list

Supporting the wellbeing of self and others

Trauma-informed practice in schools: An explainer

This brief introduction summarises the evidence on trauma-informed practice within an educational context.

🔗 <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/trauma-informed-practice.pdf>

Australian Students Wellbeing Framework

The Framework site contains video resources for school leaders.

🔗 <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/framework>

Greater Good Science Centre

This online resource has a range of evidence-based tips, tools and resources to support social and emotional wellbeing.

🔗 <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

Be You National Mental Health Initiative

Provides educators with knowledge, resources and strategies for helping children and young people achieve their best possible mental health.

🔗 <https://beyou.edu.au>

Reachout

ReachOut is a source of online mental health resources. The schools' section of the site provides resources and outlines barriers to students' help seeking.

🔗 <https://schools.au.reachout.com>

Conclusion

As a critical incident is occurring there is often little or no time for school leaders to seek out the evidence on best approaches to addressing specific situations. The three stages of triage, transition and transform provide a useful framework for assisting school leaders to understand the particular challenges they may face during each phase of a crisis and offers opportunities for reflection. It is also critical to consider the health and wellbeing of both self and others at each phase of a crisis.

Leading through uncertainty requires leadership that is flexible and can adapt to changing circumstances. It also requires collaboration, teamwork and the mobilisation of a diverse range of skills from the broader school community to collectively meet challenges. Extraordinary times present many challenges, but they also afford opportunities for learning and growth.

Want to learn more? Join our teacher and school leader community

A Facebook group for you to ask questions, give advice or share something you've found useful.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/642234353224029/>

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Research has found that reading to children is beneficial in improving vocabulary, reading ability and encouraging positive attitudes towards reading (Niklas & Schneider, 2013; Rodriguez & Tarnis-LeMonda, 2011; Westerlund & Lagerberg, 2008). Furthermore, home activities such as playing games with numbers can predict better numeracy ability and attitudes (Skwarchuk et al., 2014; Anders et al., 2012; LeFevre et al., 2009; Sammons et al., 2015).