Leading in a Crisis

How can we lead our community through the current coronavirus crisis while also laying a foundation to better prepare for, respond to, and learn from future crises?

Leadership in the Time of Crisis

A black swan event

A "black swan event" is "an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility.

"It carries an extreme impact.

"In spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable."

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*

"Taleb suggests that trying to identify potential black swan events is a pointless exercise and that, instead, **our time is best spent preparing for the impact of negative events and positioning ourselves to exploit the positive ones.**"

Donna Orem, "A Crisis at Our Door," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Why leadership matters during crisis

"Crisis leadership matters because

- leaders of organizations and nations **can make a difference in the extent to which people are affected** by a crisis.
- in its absence, the stakeholders who are adversely affected by the crisis cannot truly recover from the damaging event.
- despite the damage that is caused by a crisis, effective leadership is the one factor that **creates the potential for a company and its stakeholders to be better off following the crisis** than it was before the crisis."

Erika Hayes James and Lynn Perry Wooten, "Crisis Leadership: Why It Matters," *European Financial Review* (December 2011)

How a good leader reacts to a crisis

- **"Take a moment** to figure out what's going on….
- **"Act promptly, not hurriedly**…. You can act with deliberateness as well as speed….
- **"Manage expectations**…. It falls to the leader in charge to address the size and scope of the crisis….
- **"Demonstrate control**…. You do not control the disaster—be it man-made or natural—but you can control the response….
- **"Keep loose**…. A hallmark of a crisis is its ability to change quickly; your first response may not be your final response....
- **"Provide perspective**…. Effective leaders can often do more by standing back from the action."

John Baldoni, "How a Good Leader Reacts to a Crisis," *Harvard Business Review* (January 4, 2011)

Five ways to adapt and lead through a crisis

- **"Seek credible information**….
- **"Use appropriate communication channels**….
  Key information should be handled with the 3 *Rs*: *review, repeat, reinforce*….
- **"Explain what your organization is doing about the crisis.**
  During a crisis, time is compressed…. Sometimes you have to begin tackling a problem before you have a solid grasp of what's happening….
- **"Be present, visible, and available....**
- **"Dedicate organizational resources for future crises."**

Gene Klann, *Crisis Leadership* (2003; summarized in Center for Creative Leadership, "Five Ways to Adapt and Lead Through a Crisis")

The role of information in a crisis

"Information is powerful because it

- reduces emotional distress caused by the unknown,
- diminishes fear,
- provides tactical guidance, and
- demonstrates to employees that their leaders are concerned, involved, knowledgeable, and on top of the situation."

Gene Klann, *Crisis Leadership* (2003; summarized in Center for Creative Leadership, "Five Ways to Adapt and Lead Through a Crisis")

Creating a network of teams

"To promote rapid problem solving and execution under high-stress, chaotic conditions, leaders can organize a network of teams…. a highly adaptable assembly of groups, which are united by a common purpose and work together in much the same way that the individuals on a single team collaborate." These networks are:

- **"multidisciplinary**…
- **"designed to act**…
- **"adaptable**, reorganizing, expanding, or contracting as teams learn more about the crisis and as conditions change…."

"Leaders should foster collaboration and transparency across the network of teams. One way they do this is by distributing authority and sharing information."

Gemma D'Auria and Aaron De Smet, "Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges," McKinsey & Company (March 2020)

Insights from heads of school about leading during crisis

"It's important to have a strong team at your school—and if you don't have an emergency team already in place, get one with key people in different areas who can help inform your decision."
—Veronica Codrington-Cazeau, The Evergreen School (WA)

"Have someone outside of the education world as a sounding board. Someone who is looking at this from maybe the perspective of a small business owner or a CEO or CFO of a corporation."
—Brent Bell, Darlington School (GA)

"Children are depending on us to get through this in a way that is healthy and allows them to continue growing joyfully. We are going to be flooded from time to time with decisions, and not forgetting the humanity at the center of those decisions is what's most important."
—Crissy Cáceres, Brooklyn Friends School (NY)

Donna Orem, "A Conversation: 3 Heads Discuss Their Decision-Making Process Amid Coronavirus (COVID-19)," *Independent Ideas* blog (March 16, 2020)

Advice from a Seattle-area head

Rob Phillips, head of Seattle Academy (WA), shared what his school has learned in the early days of transitioning to an online/remote learning environment.

Revisit succession planning and redundancies.
"Heads of school, school leadership teams, and boards are filled with the highest risk demographic…. So now is the time to get shared clarity for who takes over for any of us…. We also need to be thinking about redundancies. Too many of us have indispensable tech staff members, or registrars, or facilities managers, or CFOs…. As teachers get sick, we need redundancy in instruction. This may take us into more interdisciplinary models. For example, a staffing model with larger numbers of kids [with more than one teacher]… We may need to focus on developing curriculum that is less idiosyncratic…."

Acknowledge that we're going to be leading in this mode for a long time.
"Start to shift thinking about next year, and being in a blended model where we might have some kids back on campus and others continuing remotely… Reconsider the way we think about class size—in part because we will have kids in blended settings for the long haul, and in part because given the magnitude of economic hurdles coming at us, we need to rethink the financial model if we're going to support the increased demand for financial aid in our communities while also supporting faculty and staff."

Advice from a Seattle-area head (continued)

Lessons learned in the early transition to online/remote learning:

- **Importance of the advisory function.** "Schools need to devote bandwidth and time and faculty energy into checking in with kids on an individual and small-group level apart from the teaching and learning side of things." Likewise, "we need to think through how to provide the same sense of camaraderie and support and mentoring for faculty and staff."
- **"Kids really appreciate video-conferencing.** They like to see each other, and they feel less isolated."
- **Less is more.** "With the best of intentions, teachers are assigning too much, and it's creating fatigue for them and for kids."
- **Assume that we're going to be in this mode for the rest of the school year.**

"We're learning a ton about teaching and learning, about how to be nimble and stable at the same time, and about how to reexamine assumptions in ways that will be incredibly positive down the line. We're finding underappreciated strengths in individual teachers and leaders, as well as teams. We're seeing holes and deficits we didn't understand before, and the aspirational language we all use around innovation and DEI and preparing kids for the future is being put to the test."

The three stages of a crisis life cycle

"While there is no single roadmap to help a school survive a crisis, understanding the crisis life cycle and adopting key leadership mindsets—such as adaptability, empathy, and resiliency—can help."

- Stage 1: Assessment, Preparedness, Prevention
- Stage 2: Response
- Stage 3: Learning, Growth, Transformation

Myra McGovern, "Full Cycle," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Crisis Life Cycle Stage 1: Assessment, Preparedness, Prevention

Crisis Life Cycle: Stage 1

In advance of an emergency, focus on assessing risks, preventing crises, and preparing for potential emergencies.

- Evaluate risks.
- Form a crisis response team.
- Establish policies and procedures, and shift behaviors to mitigate risks.
- Train staff to identify problems and prevent crises.
- Develop relationships with community partners.

Myra McGovern, "Full Cycle," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Evaluating risks

"Risk management is a school's process or program used to assess risk—or exposure to danger or loss—and then to make decisions about how to manage the risks."

Megan Mann, "Risk Management" *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Evaluating risks: The steps of risk management

1. **Identify Risks.**
   Develop processes. Create a risk register by listing the risks your institution commits to managing.

2. **Analyze & Prioritize Risks.**
   Focus on the likelihood and severity of each. Doing so helps you prioritize and decide how to respond to each risk.

3. **Treat Risks.**
   Create and commit to a treatment or mitigation plan by deciding to avoid, mitigate, transfer, retain, or accept each risk.

4. **Monitor the Process.**
   Continually assess how environments have changed and whether risk treatments are working.

Based on Alex Miller, Constance Neary, and Debra Wilson, *Rise Above Uncertainty: Advancing Risk Management at Independent Schools,* NAIS and United Educators

Forming a crisis team

Who is on the team varies from school to school, but the following people are often included:

Core Team	Expanded Team
Head of School	Division Heads
Communications Director	Advancement Director
Board Chair	Admissions Director
School Attorney	School Psychologist
IT Director	Specialized Counsel (child protection expert or criminal law, etc.)
Other members of the Core Admin Team	Head of Security

Jane Hulbert and Myra McGovern, "Trends in School Crises: What to Expect and How to Prepare," 2020 NAIS Annual Conference Presentation

To manage issues specific to the coronavirus crisis, crisis teams should include the curriculum director, education technology specialist, HR director, school psychologist, health director, director of residential life, and director of international programs.

Establishing policies and procedures

Review or establish policies and practices in areas such as the following:

- Student enrollment contracts
- Employment contracts
- Communicable disease policies
- Quarantine and self-isolation contracts

To help establish policy related to managing the coronavirus crisis, you'll find guidance and links to resources at www.nais.org/coronavirus.

Training staff

"People need to have confidence that they'll know what to do in different crisis situations and that they'll be able to execute the plan successfully."

- **Conduct tabletop exercises** with your board and crisis teams to practice how you would respond in different situations. As James and Wooten say in "Crisis Leadership: Why It Matters," scenario planning "helps leaders create cognitive maps that provide a reference point and increase the organization's ability to navigate unfamiliar terrain."
- **Train staff to identify problems and prevent crises.**
- **Practice/drill emergency preparedness plans.**

Myra McGovern, "Full Cycle," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming). Erika Hayes James and Lynn Perry Wooten, "Crisis Leadership: Why It Matters" (December 2011)

Developing relationships

Develop relationships with partners such as these:

- Law enforcement agencies
- Local fire department
- Local/regional public and private schools
- Independent school heads (via NAIS Connect online communities)

During the coronavirus crisis in particular, it is essential to work with your state department of public health and to closely monitor guidance from such federal authorities as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Find additional links at www.nais.org/coronavirus.

Crisis Life Cycle Stage 2: Response

Crisis Life Cycle Stage 2: Response

In the midst of an emergency:

- Assess the situation.
- Communicate with constituents.
- Take care of the community (and yourself).
- Determine what the school needs to resume business operations.

Assessing the situation

Assess the situation and determine what your community needs.

Get the facts: Who was involved? What happened? When? Where? Why? Who/what was affected? What is the school's role? What needs to happen next?

Find links to facts about the coronavirus crisis from reliable sources at www.nais.org/coronavirus.

Using polarity management during crisis

"A fundamental question to ask when encountering a challenging situation is**: 'Is this a problem we can solve, or is it an ongoing polarity, paradox, or dilemma that we must manage well?'"**

Leaders, teams, and organizations become more effective as they learn to distinguish between the two and deal productively with both. Through this work, they can consciously use diversity and divergent thinking as resources for developing high performing cultures that promote community and productivity."

Barry Johnson, "Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems"

Communicating with constituents

Set a calm and measured tone to instill confidence and reduce stress.

Share the facts; do not speculate. Detail how you are making decisions and which sources you are consulting. Indicate when you will communicate again.

Communicate empathy for your audience's health concerns and inconvenience.

Use the school's mission and values to shape your language and reinforce ties to the school.

Jane Hulbert and Myra McGovern, "Trends in School Crises: What to Expect and How to Prepare," 2020 NAIS Annual Conference Presentation

NAIS heads have shared sample communications related to the coronavirus crisis on the NAIS Connect online communities.

Taking care of the community

Consider the psychological needs of different constituent groups. What are students, faculty and staff, families, and alumni feeling? How can you best address their needs?

Share concrete actions that community members can take. This helps build a sense of self-efficacy.

Help others with tough communications. Share tips to help families support children through the crisis.

Care for yourself too. Leaders who show their vulnerabilities can help build stronger long-term teams.

Find resources for taking care of your community during the coronavirus crisis at www.nais.org/coronavirus.

Resources include:
- Explanation of psychological needs during a pandemic
- Tips for self-efficacy
- Tips for parents
- Self-care resources

Getting back up and running

- **Address instructional continuity.**
- **Address business continuity.**
- **Look ahead** to address and mitigate the impact of a crisis on enrollment, advancement, staffing, and other key areas of operations.

Find resources to help you address instructional and business continuity during the coronavirus crisis at www.nais.org/coronavirus.

Resources and links address areas such as these:
- School-sponsored travel
- Physical plant management
- Online learning

The role of the board in a crisis

"The board should be working closely with the chief executive to govern and manage the situation, as well as address external threats. **While the CEO is responsible for operational planning and executing these plans, the board should be reviewing and responding to the organization's strategy**, and providing feedback.

As the board reviews the organization's plans, it should consider:
- What aspects of this situation could affect our organization?
- What are the organization's greatest vulnerabilities?
- What questions from the press would we least like to face?
- How can we prevent worse-case scenarios from occurring?"

Joy Folkedal and Lindsay Tallman, "What Nonprofit Board Members Should Be Doing Right Now to Address the COVID-19 Situation" BoardSource (March 16, 2020)

Crisis Life Cycle Stage 3: Learning, Growth, and Transformation

Crisis Life Cycle Stage 3: Learning, Growth, and Transformation

After your community has weathered a crisis, focus on lessons learned and the ways your community can grow as a result of the experience.

- Debrief after every crisis event. In what ways was the response effective? What could you have done differently?
- Evaluate the root causes of the crisis.
- Consider the opportunities. What new possibilities has the situation exposed or created?

Debriefing

"As with students learning in our schools, talking about the issues can help adults process and encode learning too. In 'Learning From Crisis' from the *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management,* researchers Edward Deverell and Eva-Karin Olsson recommend transferring knowledge gained during a crisis to 'nonhuman repositories,' such as policies, strategies, ceremonies, and rules."

After every event, ask:
*   In what ways was the response effective?
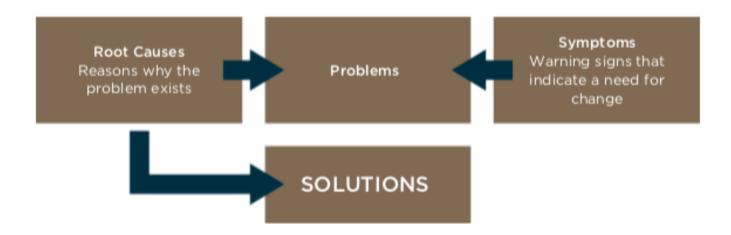*   What could you have done differently?

Myra McGovern, "Full Cycle," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Determining root causes

Evaluate the root causes of the crisis, not just the symptoms. Gather data and information, and use it to adjust your organizational strategy.

Root Cause Analysis is a step-by-step approach to gaining a deep understanding of a problem and why it exists, and then designing solutions that eliminate the *cause* of the problem rather than simply treating its symptoms.

Root Causes Reasons why the problem exists	→	**Problems**	←	**Symptoms** Warning signs that indicate a need for change

SOLUTIONS

Adapted from materials provided at NAIS School Leadership Team Experience

Evaluating opportunities

"Consider the opportunities your situation offers. While many organizations work to return to the status quo after a crisis, innovative organizations consider the new possibilities the situation exposes or creates."

Has your market changed? Did you learn new ways to reach students? Have you uncovered strengths among faculty and staff?

Myra McGovern, "Full Cycle," *Independent School* magazine, Summer 2020 (forthcoming)

Questions and Next Steps

Strategic Questions

- How do we assess risk as a school? How might we improve the process? How do we mitigate risk?
- How do we train staff to reduce risk? How do we practice our preparedness measures?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the board, head, and admin team during the crisis?
- What external expertise could we leverage to better prepare our school and strengthen our ties with the community?
- What is the likely impact of this event on school enrollment? On alternative revenue streams (after-care, summer camps, etc.)? On giving? (Consider best case, most likely case, and worst case.)
- What actions should we take immediately?
- What do we need to communicate?
- In what ways can we reinforce our values and the value of our community as we care for others?
- What can we learn from the way our school responded to the crisis?
- What opportunities are there for growth?

Generative Questions

- If you were to describe the school in three words, what would they be?
- What has changed? What is the impact? What might happen next?
- What can we learn from this?
- What are we not yet seeing? Where do we need greater clarity? What information would help us move forward?
- What new challenges have emerged for families or children? How might the school address those new needs?
- If we were starting the school today, what would we do differently? What would we replicate or keep the same?
- If money were no object, how would we deliver on our mission?

Sources

- Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*
- Donna Orem, "A Crisis at Our Door," *Independent School* magazine
- Erika Hayes James and Lynn Perry Wooten, "Crisis Leadership: Why It Matters," *European Financial Review*
- John Baldoni, "How a Good Leader Reacts to a Crisis," *Harvard Business Review*
- Gene Klann, *Crisis Leadership* (summarized in Center for Creative Leadership, "Five Ways to Adapt and Lead Through a Crisis")
- Gemma D'Auria and Aaron De Smet, "Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges," McKinsey & Company
- Donna Orem, "A Conversation: 3 Heads Discuss Their Decision-Making Process Amid Coronavirus (COVID-19)," *Independent Ideas* blog
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- Joy Folkedal and Lindsay Tallman, "What Nonprofit Board Members Should Be Doing Right Now to Address the COVID-19 Situation" BoardSource
- NAIS, Coronavirus Resources for Schools (www.nais.org/coronavirus)