An Administrator's Perspective on the Novel Coronavirus

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Abstract

In our current situation, of COVID 19, many school administrators feel helpless and powerless. Bringing students back into the classroom puts leaders in a position where they cannot guarantee everyone's safety. Leaders are under pressure to keep faculty, staff, and students safe and that responsibility can be overwhelming (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020a). Administrators have an obligation to provide an education to students. It is what educators, do, after all. However, school leaders also have an obligation as an employer to make sure our staff is supported and safe. It is hard to believe that leaders can do more than react to and manage this crisis. But leaders can choose to respond, not react. This article suggests actions to reduce our own anxiety, support others, and create a healthy environment. These choices are ones that will change our environment for the better.

Introduction

The Novel Coronavirus has truly been a shock to our educational system and has placed a tremendous amount of stress on school administrators and teachers. The pandemic and resulting school closures have led to an unprecedented need for crisis management in schools. This paper is a single case study which provides a first-person account of how one school administrator handled issues related to the pandemic and her response to stress. The authors also provide examples of best practice for well-being. Going forward, as the uncertainty of COVID-19 begins to decline, there may be small permanent lessons school administrators can take and apply to other crisis situations.

Related Literature

This article contributes to the literature on school leadership during periods of heightened uncertainty. During such episodes, the typical response of school leaders dealing with crisis is to carry out plans to circumvent and deal with the situation effectively. Research using several different sources of data provides an analysis of the

problems in COVID-19 crisis management. Shangguan et al. (2020) suggests the following factors lead to problems: (1) information disclosure or control, (2) assessment of dangers and threats, (3), establishment of crisis information communication channels and health education platforms, (4) making and implementation of strategic crisis response plans, and (5) overall mobilization of critical resources. While the literature provides best practice in crisis management, a worldwide pandemic is an ongoing crisis with no set timeline and requires unique tactics in dealing with this uncertain and unfamiliar situation. This paper also contributes to the growing literature on the impact of pandemics as the source of uncertainty related to crisis management in schools.

In order to assist with decision-making strategies, a rapid assessment and analysis of the potential of the given threat to disrupt the school community (risk-level) must be taken seriously and investigated by following the threat assessment procedures listed in the school's comprehensive emergency operations plan. "A leader has to be ready to hit the ground running because a crisis is an unplanned event" (Estep, 2005, p. 1).

A crisis support team consisting of local police, superintendent, assistant superintendent, administrators, pupil services, counselors, teachers, family liaisons, and a media/publication chair would determine the plan of action and formulate the statement to the public (Estep, 2005). With the goal of ameliorating the effects of the crisis, it is critical that the crisis team work together to form a plan of action that considers the risks and identifies preventive measures while presenting accurate, timely, and key information to all stakeholders: staff, students, families, and public community (Agnes, 2015).

During a crisis, the last thing a district needs is the appearance of being unorganized or ill-prepared to handle the event. Any appearance of incompetency or unreadiness will not bode well with the community and could endanger students and staff. (Estep, 2005, p. 1)

Crisis management plans often are created without systematic review. Therefore, school crisis management and intervention are often limited by outdated or uncoordinated plans (MacNeil & Topping, 2007). Therefore, in an ideal situation, this team has met regularly to understand the predictable risks through training/retraining, creating emergency plans that are revisited, and building trusting relationships with stakeholders (Estep, 2005). Staff should be made aware of the potential risk and if/as needed begin their roles and responsibilities for keeping students, themselves, and the school property safe.

Every school should have a communication plan in place, that is followed so that everyone is informed and can respond appropriately (Coombs, 2010, 2015). Melissa Agnes (2015) said that we need to "get ahead of the story before the story is already ahead of you" (02:48-02:50). The district should identify a point person for communication. This individual should be the only person to comment or communicate on behalf of the district. In following this procedure, the district can ensure the integrity of the information that is shared with the public, including adherence to FERPA

requirements. Crisis communication should be approached through a network perspective. "Network perspectives encourage people to view communication as a system of interdependent relationships that influence individual and collective crisis responses" (Ford et al., 2016, p. 317). Information should be factual, transparent, consistent, and as simply stated as the crisis warrants (Coombs, 2010, 2015).

The assessment of the situation should determine the amount, time, and to whom the information is disseminated. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2015), "all school districts should develop and implement threat assessment procedures that are clearly communicated to staff and families" (p. 1). With procedures in place, stakeholders can apprise themselves of the plan in regard to communication and general actions. A communication plan should consider use of technology that imparts constant contact, such as twitter and mobile apps which provide the ability to send text, email, and phone messages within minutes. Information can, and should, be sent quickly and accurately to help quell and/or deter a social media rampage of information seeking and possible misinformation.

Successful crisis management requires a focus on regular communication with all stakeholders before, during, and after the crisis (Agnes, 2015; Combs, 2010, 2015). Following the crisis, it is important to hold in-person or virtual meetings or town halls so that families, community members, and school staff have the opportunity and access to administration to express their concerns and to ask questions. It is important to be proactive every day and to build trust and credibility with stakeholders (Agnes, 2015).

School leaders have dealt with bomb threats, fights, drugs, and school shootings, but the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to crisis management. Educators have shifted in-person classrooms to online classrooms, while simultaneously addressing the need for each student to have internet access and a laptop. Many districts have had to strategically park school busses in neighborhoods to provide internet access for their students and provide professional development to teachers regarding online course development and teaching strategies. All of this has placed remarkable stress on school administrators. "Knowing how to remain calm and deal with a crisis in a systemic but decisive manner requires a leader with considerable skill and confidence" (Yukl, 2012, p. 180).

There are different models for crisis management, and some are more suited than others to the Coronavirus pandemic. The Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model combines risk communication with crisis communication for emergency public health events (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). This model is used to share the potential risks to the public and "to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage" (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 46). Specifically, the authors cite the CDC as the leading organization to use the CERC model in response to bioterrorism, or purposeful spreading of disease (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

The problem that exists with the Coronavirus pandemic is that it is a crisis for which no roadmap has been developed. School administrators have dealt with crises for years, and school management teams have developed and fine-tuned plans after each major incident. A yearly review is a requirement for school safety plans. A good crisis plan requires the team review and evaluate their processes after each implementation of the plan. However, leaders are now in uncharted territory. Not only was there not a plan in place for a global pandemic, school administrators didn't even realize it was a crisis until they were in the thick of it. Utilizing aspects of crisis management planning could help with future preparation for unrealized crises.

The Case

There was no predicting what the fall of 2020 would bring. As educators left school on March 13, 2020, they prepared for a short-term gig. Stay home. Slow the spread. And then everyone can all get back to normal. Fast forward four months and schools began preparing for this current normal (the authors refuse to say new normal because this will not last forever). But those preparations changed weekly, sometimes even daily. Any decisions that were made had to be revisited, sometimes two or three times.

When the stay at home order was issued in Ohio, this administrator felt a responsibility not only to continue to educate students, but also to support their staff. They were not prepared to teach students remotely. Students were not prepared to learn remotely. The administrator spent the months of March, April, and May furiously trying to support teachers, families, and students. She found herself working 10 - 12 hours a day because the 'To Do List' never seemed to get shorter. She remembered thinking if YOU don't do this, how can you expect THEM to do this?

There are several analogies used to explain this unique situation. Some have referred to putting out fires all the time. Others have referenced the Whack a Mole game. Everyone knows the one, the arcade game where a person uses a giant mallet to pound little gophers that pop up unexpectedly. In the administrators mind, however, neither of those comparisons really captures the intensity of this situation. Putting out fires implies that the issues end once the fire is out. The issues just change direction right now. Playing the Whack a Mole game is a choice. Our situation is not. It is a continual, seemingly never ending, cycle of issues and problems, some of which could never have been imagined. So, I offer this analogy:

Imagine sitting outside, finishing a picnic with family and friends. The day is winding down and everyone is sitting by the fire. Good food, good conversation, perhaps even a cocktail to end a wonderful day. As the sun sets, dusk falls. The mosquitoes come out, and the game begins. I know I am going to get bit. I know the following days will be filled with itching and irritation. I know this is inevitable, but I am not willing to give up. It has been such a great day, and I are still having so much fun. I swat, and scratch, and complain. I even try to slow the massacre with citronella candles and bugspray. But neither of those preventative measures take away the reality that I am going to get bit. This is how I feel about the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

Administrators sit in a unique position. Bringing students back into the classroom puts them in a position where they cannot guarantee everyone's safety. The safety measures put in place such as temperature checks upon entry, required masks, social distancing procedures, testing and tracing, and sanitation efforts could still not be enough and put people at risk (Neese, 2020). Leaders are under so much pressure to keep everyone safe and that responsibility can be overwhelming (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020a). Administrators have an obligation to provide an education to our students. It is what they do, after all. However, they also have an obligation as an employer to make sure their staff is supported and safe.

It is a continual struggle to balance out these two priorities. This is why I hold the mosquito analogy. I love my job. Prior to the Pandemic, it was a great picnic! I enjoy the people I work with and have developed great working relationships. I love the students and families in our district. I feel a sense of satisfaction when great things are achieved and a sense of purpose when there are things to work on. But dusk has fallen on the job I love. I know the mosquitoes are there, and they are feasting. As fast as I can swat one away, another one comes buzzing in. There are days that the mosquitoes come at me so fast and furious that I know there is no protecting myself. Whatever decision I make, or guidance I give, will result in ten more issues and concerns. Which I will have to deal with eventually. The swatting that I am doing does not stop the welts that will be there the following day. But, I am not willing to give up. It has been too much fun. It is what I love. It is who I am. So, the question becomes, how can administrators help to mitigate the onslaught of mosquitoes? How can they manage the dusk that has fallen on the picnic? Leaders know it will end eventually, dusk always turns into night which turns into another day. What preventive measures can be put in place to minimize stress and anxiety so that leaders can get back to the picnic we love?

A Leader's Response to the Pandemic

In the face of the pandemic and everything that's frightening in our world, school administrators can make a difference in the lives of the people they work with, our students, and their families. As administrators consider the needs of others, they can offer our support to others and respond to those around us with kindness, generosity, and compassion. When leaders are able to extend compassion to others, it creates a better environment for all of us, and by modeling this behavior, leaders encourage others to do the same. Kindness and generosity promote well-being, facilitates feelings of personal fulfillment, helps tackle serious issues, and creates a sense of community.

Educators often claim they went into teaching because they experienced a call to teach, and in doing so, they work for the benefit of others. Reinvest your personal commitment to serving the needs of others at this critical time. An element of transformational leadership is individualized consideration, which is characterized by leaders paying attention to the needs of their followers, providing a supportive climate, and acting as coaches or mentors to develop followers into leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Northouse, 2019; Riggio, 2014). The people school administrators work with are special because they know them and have formed relationships with them. The development of

relationships between leaders and followers is essential in individualized consideration because the same approach will not work for everyone, and leaders must know each individual in order to recognize and address their needs and personal development (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). As an educational leader, knowing staff and students is essential to determining how best to handle daily situations, as well as those that involve change or in times of crisis (Yukl, 2012). Associated with individualized consideration is thoughtfulness, accountability, and listening intently.

Look people in the eyes, give them your full attention, and then listen. This can be very difficult for administrators, as the To Do List is always staring us in the face. Real listening requires us to stop multitasking and to focus on what the other person is saying. Listening is much harder than speaking, arguing with someone's point of view, or trying to solve their problems. It involves focusing on what another person is saying and feeling, repeating back their words, and asking questions (Bregman, 2011). Respecting someone else's feelings, helping people to feel better, and address needs requires active listening (Bregman, 2011). People need to feel heard during this time. Be truly present and engage with those around you. Generate your own presence in a way that can deeply touch the life that is here and available in every moment. Wearing masks to protect against the coronavirus can alter our interactions with others by eliminating facial expression and connection with others (Ong, 2020). The eyes are the part of the face that remain unobscured. You can intentionally connect with others through your eyes. Smile! And because you cannot see each other smile, find new ways to show joy - spirit fingers, thumbs up, head nods, waves, and even winks can be practices that are taught to students and other adults in the building to show our positive response. Ever try teaching a kindergartener to wink? It's enough to make anyone belly laugh! Leaders need to be there for themselves, for the people they lead, and for their students. Let people know that you are here for them. Do not dwell on what you cannot do anymore. Instead, find new ways to do old things.

COVID-19 has forced the issue of teachers' and students' health to the forefront, and the guidance from the federal, state, and local governments changes on a daily basis making it nearly impossible to put a plan in place for the academic year. Stakeholders can easily become frustrated as constant changes are being communicated. Thinking through the message and the means of sending that message helps to prevent unintended consequences. "As we work to reopen our school buildings in these rapidly changing times, communication and developing relationships with our stakeholders should be a priority" (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020b, p. 1). Building relationships is critical for success in any organization, and a key component of relationship-building during such unprecedented times is clear and consistent communication.

Although communication is the leader's responsibility, they need to enlist the school's stakeholders in the communication process. During a time of crisis when facts are changing and decisions are in flux, communication requires the involvement of all partners (Schneider & Hollenczer, 2006). Using all stakeholders to get factual information out accurately and in a timely fashion is essential. An administrator who

uses effective communication management tools will reap tremendous benefits and build trust with stakeholders (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020b). "The principal will capture the support of stakeholders and hold their trust and respect when they are needed the most" (Schnieder & Hollenczer, 2006, p. 74). Consider the following regarding your communication plan:

- Make sure people know where to get information. The school website is a good place for posting the most current information.

- Remember that not all families CAN access information in the manner we think is best or easiest. Multiple means of communication will be imperative.

- Remember that not all families WILL access information in the manner we think is best or easiest. Repeated communication will be imperative.

- Provide a consistent message that the decisions you are making are based on the most current factual information available.

- Provide teaching and learning resources for staff members.

- Provide teaching and learning resources for parents.

- Maintain a positive tone and ensure that you are working through this together.

Finally, leaders need to remain calm and not panic. "Never let a bad situation bring out the worst in you. Be strong and choose to be positive" (Claudette, 2017, p. 1). There is so much leaders cannot control in today's environment. The one thing they can always control is their attitude and mindset.

Personal Response to COVID 19

The pandemic has made the work insurmountable where resources are scarce, solutions are few, and all eyes are on the administrator to deliver. It is easy to feel over-stressed and burned out and even easier to fall into habits of getting by that don't serve our overall well-being. Being mindful of our own needs and recognizing that self-care is just as important as the care leaders give others is critical for administrators during stressful times.

Exercise can be a great way to manage stress. Keeping active with some form of enjoyable regular exercise or time outdoors has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, improve sleep, enhance mood, increase energy levels, and improve overall mental health (Star, 2019). Exercise decreases stress hormones, like cortisol, while increasing endorphins that lift moods naturally (Budde et al., 2015). Research has found that exercise may be a way to cope with current stress, but it may also provide some resistance toward future stress (Childs & De Wit, 2014; Star, 2019). Physical activity is

correlated with a lower reactivity toward stress; meaning people who exercise may become less affected by stress overtime (Star, 2019).

Another aspect important to stress management is allowing ourselves some downtime. Spend quality time alone doing things that are relaxing, meaningful, personally rewarding, or nourishing. Take a walk outside, meditate, read a book, take a bubble bath, or listen to music. What matters is that you gift yourself time for you. Oftentimes, this is one of the most difficult things to do as an administrator. Allowing ourselves some guilty pleasures is difficult to justify when there is always so much to do. Try to carve out a small chunk of time, if not daily, at least every couple of days, to really recharge. And do not feel bad if your recharging involves the self-indulgence of time to yourself! The key is to let your mind and your body take a break from the constant barrage of thinking, and deciding, and talking!!

Stress and anxiety can make getting a healthy amount of sleep each night more difficult. In addition, it can compromise the quality of sleep people do get (Mammoser, 2020). LeMonda, a senior neuropsychologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City stated,

We know that sleep is directly related to immunity in terms of the physiological response in our body: If we're not sleeping we can reduce our immune system, we can increase inflammation in the body, which we know can then lead to being more vulnerable to various viruses or whatever might be in our environment. (Mammoser, 2020, p. 1)

Sleep deprivation can affect the immune system, negatively impacting mental and physical health, and make you more susceptible to illness and the novel coronavirus (Mammoser, 2020). Less than six to seven hours per night on a routine basis suppresses the immune system and increases, by more than 50%, your risk of getting cancer (Walker, 2018). Humans require more than seven hours of sleep each night to maintain cognitive performance. After 16 hours of being awake, the brain begins to fail (Walker, 2018). The human mind cannot accurately sense how sleep-deprived it has become when it is sleep-deprived (Walker, 2018). With so much pressure to make good decisions, a good night's sleep is more important than ever before. Set a regular time to unplug and throw in the towel each night. There is not much that can be done at 3 am - no zoom meetings, no parent phone calls, no classroom observations. And, the things that can be done during the day can be done the following day. So, use your time wisely and sleep when you can.

Finally, it is imperative as a leader during these times that leaders understand that they will need to forgive ourselves. They will make bad decisions. They will forget to include someone on a critical communication. They will be short tempered. It will happen. Know that the desire may be to be a superhero for everyone around you, but the reality is leaders are human. Be vulnerable, especially those that make up your critical support team. Vulnerability is difficult for many leaders, but it is a quality that helps build stronger relationships. Admit when you make a mistake, drop the ball, or just don't do the right thing. Apologize. Then, move on. Accept that you are not perfect, that you can't

fix everything, and your team will respect you more. Respect from followers comes from hard work and dedication, not from perfection.

Over the past several months, we have heard the phrase *these are crazy times.* Despite the craziness, there are also times filled with many blessings and so much to be grateful for. "Gratitude is the expression of appreciation for what one has" (Gratitude, n.d.) and taking notice of the good in your life. A sense of gratitude generates happiness and feelings of positivity and optimism both inward and outward. Research has shown that people who practice gratitude reap a wide range of benefits, including less stress, less pain, less loneliness and isolation, less depression, better sleep, stronger immune systems, better job performance, and more joy and pleasure (Mindful Staff, 2019; Gratitude, n.d.). Further, researchers at Indiana University found that "simply expressing gratitude may have lasting effects on the brain" (Mindful Staff, 2019, p. 2). They determined that practicing gratitude can lead to greater sensitivity of experiencing gratitude in the future (Mindful Staff, 2019).

Gratitude and reflection are so valuable to the human spirit and psyche. Taking time to reflect on the journey and express gratitude for the many blessings along the way is one way to cultivate gratitude. When you look back over the past six months, think about what WE have done. What did we accomplish? What did we learn? How did the pandemic change our circumstances, and what did it allow us to do? In other words, What did we do? Who did we connect with? What did we get to do (that otherwise you would not have been able to)? Finally, what in your life are you most grateful for? Use this opportunity to celebrate with those around you. Virtually high five your team for a job well done. There are amazing things happening right now, many of which we would not have pushed ourselves to explore or experience in education if we had not been thrust into this situation. Take a few moments to pat yourself on the back for the innovation that is happening. Then - get back to work!!

The authors of this article want to express their gratitude to all of the superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, and support staff who work so hard for our children-- many thanks! This is a stressful, chaotic time. But it is also a time when strong, reflective leadership is critical. It is amazing to see so many rise to the occasion!

Summary

Crisis management is a critical part of an administrator's job. It is one that educators hope they never have to employ or utilize past practices and incidents as the basis for their planning. This year, school administrators were faced with a crisis that was unimaginable. No plan existed for remotely teaching all of our students. No procedure was in place for supporting teachers that did not physically come to work every day. No protocol had been developed for long term communication with stakeholders on an ever-changing situation. And yet, this was the crisis school administrators faced in the spring of 2020.

As the pandemic rages on and people's lives are turned upside down, it's difficult to see that this too will change. Educators talk about the *new normal* as though our world is predictable, reliable, and permanent, but there is an impermanence to the pandemic. Pandemics have no set end point. Although the coronavirus is still raging, it will eventually subside just like the bubonic plague, cholera, swine flu, Zika, and H1N1. In this time of coronavirus, educators may have feelings of anxiety, fear, or despair. By recognizing that this too shall pass, leaders can relieve some of that anxiety that everyone feels.

If leaders simply dwell in their fear, they will miss the good in their lives. Do not forget to enjoy the wonders of life, for your sake and for the benefit of others. Most of us absorb negative feelings when we turn on our televisions, scroll through our phones, listen to the radio, or logon to our computers. There are so many avenues to ingest feelings of fear and despair every day. At those moments, individuals need to choose to turn off the phone, the television, or the radio and turn to more healthful pursuits. Be mindful of what you consume.

In our current situation, of COVID 19, many of us feel helpless and powerless. It is hard to believe that leaders can do more than react to and manage this crisis. But leaders can choose to respond, not react. School administrators can choose many actions to reduce our own anxiety, support others, and create a healthy environment. These choices are ones that will change our environment for the better.

Administrators can also choose to learn from this crisis. While it is unlikely that current administrators will face another global pandemic, it is incumbent on those of us that are living it right now to document our experiences and actions. It is imperative that leaders review our current policies and practices and generalize what has been learned to other crisis situations. In addition, our lessons learned can benefit future generations of administrators as they navigate another unforeseen crisis that may confront them.

Limitations

This article provides a first-hand, first-person account of how one school administrator dealt with issues related to the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, more specifically, school closures, difficulties with teaching and learning for students and families, and the effects of it on teachers, staff, and their own well-being. Therefore, the writing is only representative of this administrator and this context. Furthermore, the perspectives presented in this paper may be biased.

Future Research

COVID-19 is a world-wide pandemic that arrived suddenly and without warning. This study was based on a single administrator's experiences and perspectives and is not generalizable to other administrators or school settings. Future research on school administrators and COVID-19 might include outside input from a sample representative of school administrators with information collected by means of survey, interviews, focus

groups or other methods. Areas of study that would be of great benefit to school crisis management might include understanding the issues administrators had to deal with during the pandemic and their approach to addressing those problems as well as common elements of school crisis response plans, including relevant research, and evaluation support. This was just a first step. The experiences of school leaders should be collected to share different situations, different experiences, and different strategies on how to effectively, or not effectively, deal with this ever changing and confusing world-wide pandemic and other unrealized crises that we cannot foresee.

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