

Keeping It Simple: Leading in A Time of Crisis

Cutting through the glut of COVID-19 advice to the essentials of good leadership.

Robert Evans and Michael Thompson

In a crisis, especially one so unprecedented as COVID-19, many people, particularly those of us in the helping professions, want to help. Since 9/11, nearly 200 mass shootings—most of them in schools—have spawned an ever-growing number of mental health practitioners, educators, clergy, grief counselors, and leadership gurus, among others, eager to offer crisis support and guidance to school leaders. Their advice is well-meaning, but much of it is overelaborate and contradictory and ignores a core truth: however new and complex the crisis, the essentials of leading a school through it are old and simple. By this we don't mean "easy," but "basic." Leading through COVID-19 calls for the application of fundamentals that have always been vital to good leadership, and that, fortunately, are already part of most school heads' practice. They begin with courage.

Courage

In every crisis, the whole school community looks to the head, to see how you are affected (*Is she as afraid as I am?*) and how you're coping (*Is he really taking charge?*). People do this reflexively, even unconsciously, because the head is the priest in the secular parish, the ultimate parent figure. The most important thing you can do for your community is to find your reservoir of courage and to manifest that courage in a way that steadies teachers and parents. This doesn't call for bravado or chest-pounding or empty reassurance. It means facing the danger. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that "you gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do." The community doesn't expect you to be fearless, and wouldn't believe it if you pretended to be, but everyone needs to know that their leader is tackling the challenge. If you can look fear in the face and keep going, then your school community can find its courage, too. There are four ways to manifest your courage and shepherd your school: connection; candor; clarity; and empathy.

Connection

When a crisis threatens lives and disrupts relationships throughout the school community, as this one does, the head is the architect of sustaining connection. This does not mean producing voluminous communication. We've heard from many

heads about teachers who, new to distance learning and anxious to get it right, apprehensive that parents can eavesdrop on their teaching, have been overloading students and families with documents and emails. This is communication, but not connection. Connecting means reaching people in a personal way. In every organization, it's always meaningful to any employee when the boss takes a personal interest in her or him. We've heard from many heads that they begin their Zoom faculty meetings with a few minutes of asking people how they're doing, which has boosted morale. We know a public school principal who has called every one of his 100 staff, including custodians, to ask how they're coping; morale has skyrocketed. We recommend this to all school leaders. We recommend, too, that you ask faculty to make a similar outreach to parents. This kind of connection can be a generous way to support parents—and a way to remind them of the very personal value-added the school provides. Not all teachers will welcome this, but when you, as head, have modeled it yourself with them, they're more likely to do it readily and effectively.

Candor

No leader can be totally transparent—there is always information that must remain confidential—but in a crisis, it's important to be as candid as you can. Doing so demonstrates—and inspires—trust and confidence. It's a way of saying, "We can face this together." During World War II, Winston Churchill was quite direct about the dangers Britain faced. He didn't report every military reverse, but he didn't minimize the challenges. His candor helped stiffen the nation's spine. Many heads have told us about faculty who worry that enrollment will drop and require staffing cuts. Teachers may ask you, "Will I have a job next year?" and you may not honestly be able to reassure them. Rather than sugarcoat matters, it's better to say your version of, "I wish I could say yes, but I can't yet. There's too much uncertainty. Here's what I can tell you. I want us to re-open as strong as when we closed. I'm working on that with the Board. I can't give you a firm timeline today, but I promise you I will tell you whatever I can whenever I can." They'd rather have you guarantee them a job, but they'll be grateful that you're dealing with them honestly and frankly. And if, in the end, you don't have a position for them, as hard as that

conversation may be, it, too, will go better if you're as candid as you can reasonably be.

Clarity

Candor's close cousin is clarity. In the best of times it's good for a school's faculty and staff not to have to guess what the head is thinking about any important issue. In a crisis like the present one, it's crucial. Clarity means that you *specify what's negotiable and what isn't*. You may be convinced that your school needs to do X and do it in a particular way, that it needs to do Y and you'll be glad for faculty input about the best method, and that it definitely cannot do Z. If so, everyone needs to hear you spell this out. In this regard, every school has some teachers who may be fervently devoted but who are difficult, who ignore or flout authority. Right now, even they will be looking to you for direction and will, in most cases, be grateful to be told what's what. (Almost all of us would prefer to work for a leader with whom we disagree but who's clear, than one with whom we seem to agree but who isn't.) Similarly, a great many heads we've talked with say they've learned how important it has been to provide clear guidelines for families about online learning, about what parents should expect for their children, what roles they should play, and so on.

Empathy

Candor and clarity are crisp, even forceful. Together, they provide comfort and inspire confidence, but their impact is magnified when the leader combines them with empathy. In recent weeks, several governors, most notably New York's Andrew Cuomo, have earned widespread praise for providing straight talk about COVID's facts, however grim, and for doing so with genuine acknowledgement of its emotional toll. Exaggerated or inauthentic "I feel your pain" is not just futile but off-putting. But when, in a simple, honest way you name something everyone is feeling, they feel a rush of relief. They feel closer to each other and to you—and they feel energized. Your simple, truthful confirmation of how difficult this is for everyone—you included—can be powerful. ("Many of you have told me that after three weeks of Zoom teaching, you're exhausted. Me too. I think we have a right to feel tired.") There's no need to overdo this, but leaders who combine clarity and firmness with genuine empathy help their people sustain their effort and performance even in the worst circumstances.

Confidence and Gratitude

We've each consulted to hundreds of independent schools over the past 40 years, including right after 9/11 and the 2008-2009 financial meltdown. And we've worked in schools after

deaths, suicides, and major institutional crises. So we've long appreciated the burdens school leaders bear and the competence most bring to their work. The past month has renewed our appreciation. As we've discussed the thoughts above in Zoom discussions with more than 700 heads across the U.S. we've heard about the flood-tide of decisions that they've had to make and the tsunami of advice they've had to sort through, about the challenges of supporting a whole school community, of leading the response when a parent has died of COVID, of feeling acute anxiety about the school's future—and all of this while managing their own personal and family reactions to the virus's threat and to social distancing.

Easily the best part of experience has been to see and hear about the resilience and skill of so many heads. We're not surprised, but we're encouraged, because it appears there's a long way to go. What makes COVID uniquely challenging is not just its lethality and disruptiveness, but its uncertainty. There is no guaranteed "all clear" date. Many people can cope when a crisis first strikes, often with surprising strength, but most have a harder time maintaining that response over weeks and months if there is no end in sight. Periodic letdowns are inevitable. But we're confident—and grateful—that where heads can sustain their courage and stay connected, candid, clear, and empathetic, their school communities will feel well led and will cope in the very best ways they can.

Rob Evans and Michael Thompson are psychologists and school consultants. They can be reached at robevans@verizon.net and michaelthompson.phd@gmail.com.