

# You Don't Know What You Don't Know: Choices for School Administrators When Crisis Hits

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School leaders carry great responsibility when a crisis occurs. Understanding the significance and use of school crisis teams is vitally important and often unknowingly overlooked. This article examines the crucial role of school leaders when a crisis event occurs. Through combining existing research, case vignettes of actual events, and interviews with leaders, it is hoped that the gap between the unknown and the known is decreased and potential choices are increased.

## Introduction

Columbine. Paducah, Kentucky. Virginia Tech. Amish school. Once innocent locations, these now serve as raw reminders of the carnage violence at school can bring. There is little doubt as to the impact on students, schools and communities when large-scale crises such as these occur. What might be a principal's response to the crises below:

- A middle school cheerleader faints at the game and dies the next morning.
- A high school senior and his freshman girlfriend die in a fatal car accident.
- A student finally succumbs to her 4-year battle with cancer in the middle of her fifth grade year.
- A fire forces evacuation of an entire school district while school is in session.
- A student is knifed in a gang incident at his house the night before and is now in the hospital in critical condition.

While no shots rang out in these examples, students will still huddle together openly grieving, impacted by the crisis that just hit their school.

Regardless of circumstances, grieving students need support to cope with their feelings. The job of a school leader is difficult in the best of times, and in the worst of times even more so. The pressure to do the right thing when you don't know what that is generates anxiety in even the most seasoned leaders. A wise school principal once said, "I just didn't know what I didn't know." This article examines the crucial role of school leaders when a crisis event occurs. Through combining existing research, case

vignettes of actual events, and interviews with leaders, it is hoped that the gap between the unknown and the known is decreased and potential choices are increased. Readers will examine their current knowledge and assumptions, gain an understanding of crisis response teams and receive suggestions for how to proceed. Ethnographic interviews and vignettes illustrate key concepts regarding crisis response, promote readers examination of personal knowledge and assumptions and provide suggestions and resources for action.

### **A Short Self-Assessment**

Leaders are wise to ask themselves the following questions:

1. Do I know what a crisis response team is and does?
2. What are my attitude toward and assumptions about crisis response and its impact on students?
3. Does my district have a crisis team? How do I access/activate the team?
4. Who in my building is a trained member of the crisis team?
5. Who in my building has crisis intervention experience even if there is not a team?
6. To whom can I turn if I don't know the answers?

Based on the questions above which did you know? Not know? Were you surprised about what you didn't know you didn't know . . . but might need or want to know?

### **What Is Known**

The job of schools is to educate students, providing appropriate access and curriculum for all. Principals and indeed all other school leaders and personnel are taxed with the responsibility to do this to the best of their ability, giving students the foundation to live productive and fulfilling lives (Lovely, 2006). It is the students' responsibility to apply themselves and learn at school. Each day they bring lived experiences with them into the classroom. These experiences may enhance or impede their learning. A trend as we have moved into 21st Century education is that schools serve in the capacity of educating the whole child, often providing a sense of safety and stability children may lack in other areas of life (Elkind, 1990). Clearly neither schools nor their leaders can prevent or ameliorate all the negative events that affect students. Nevertheless, when the opportunity exists to actively do so, it should be taken. When a crisis occurs that impacts students, leaders rarely have power to control the event; however, they have great power to control the outcome the event has on students. This is the moment of choice. When we do not know what we do not know, we can inadvertently choose unwisely.

## What You May or May Not Know

Research informs us about the negative effects crisis events large and small have on young people. Feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety, anger, somatic symptoms, inability to concentrate, memory difficulties, denial and guilt are only a few of the many grief reactions evoked when a crisis occurs (Goldman, 2001; Wolfelt, 1996). Without adequate support and help at the time of the crisis, these reactions can become considerable long-term disruptions to children's lives (Oates, 1993; Shen & Sink, 2002). Young people in crisis need supportive, normalizing and affirming contact provided in the environment of the loss (Lovre, 2006). Appropriate school-based crisis interventions help facilitate the grieving process, mitigate the negative effects crisis events, and foster children's psychological healing and overall functioning (Allen & Ashbaker, 1994; Arman, 2000; Johnson 2000; Lovre, 2001, 2006). Conversely, not receiving adequate support has been shown to potentially produce a number of very serious results including anxiety, PTSD, depression, school failure, and suicide (Johnson, 2001; Terr, 1983).

When students are encouraged to express their feelings, it validates them and helps them grow emotionally (Seibert, Drolet & Fetro, 2003). Furthermore, providing students with the immediate means to work through crises in a positive healthy manner facilitates not only their job of effective learning, but advances the schools long-range goal of successfully educating strong, productive, contributing members of society. Proactive and effective school leaders recognize that students' well being is their primary responsibility, and well being includes mental health needs (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004).

Reflect on the choices this leader made:

### **Brooke's Story: Power Play**

During the second-to-last week of school in June, a seventh grade student suffered a brain aneurysm and eventually passed away. The head leader informed staff over the PA system as follows: "Staff and students please excuse this interruption. I need your undivided attention; I have a very important announcement to make." After a few moments pause, she went on to say, "One of our students, a seventh grader, is very sick and is in Children's Hospital right now. She is not in any pain, but she is in a coma and is unconscious. The doctors have given her medications to help her sleep and recover."

During this announcement, the student support and counseling staff looked at each other with our mouths open and shocked expressions, since this was the first any of us had been notified of the situation! As the week went on, the leader never spoke with any of us confidentially about the student's status or planned an intervention should the student die, continuing instead to only give updates over the PA system.

The student died just days before summer break. When we got together

with the leader to make a plan for telling students and supporting them in the aftermath of this event, our leader would have none of our suggestions. Instead she admonished us, "Don't make this a power struggle between counselors and leaders." Flying in the face of recommendations from many professionals with years of crisis management and direct student support experience, the students were informed of their classmate's death in an all school emergency assembly. It created complete chaos, uncontrolled situational grieving, and rendered us thoroughly ineffective to comprehensively work with students. It's so sad; it could have been so different. This story certainly makes one ask if (1) what happened was in the best interest of the students, (2) whose needs were served and (3) what knowledge was the leader lacking?

Situations like Brooke's do happen. The leader didn't know what she didn't know, and/or was unwilling or unable to utilize available resources. The fear of being viewed as inadequate was potent. Administrators are under tremendous stress during a crisis situation, often feeling personally responsible for both the incident and the outcome the response (Johnson, 2001). Contemporary leadership theory however, points to the strength in understanding and accepting your limitations, and appropriately gathering the resources necessary to augment when necessary (Leithwood et al., 2007). It is in this moment of choice that leaders must understand how their decisions have long-range impact on students and the crux of knowing the unknown is vital.

### **Leaders Need to Know**

The importance of being prepared for crisis events cannot be understated (Brock, 2002). It has been said that "an astute administration does not question whether a crisis will occur, but when it will occur, how serious it will be, and what the response should be" (Lichtenstein, Schonfeld & Kline 1994, p. 80).

It is a consistent message from those who write and train extensively on crisis response that thoughtful planning and preparation to meet the needs of schools when a crisis occurs is highly advised (Jimerson, Brock & Pletcher, 2005; Lovre, 2001; Oates, 1993; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Stevenson, 2002). A crisis response plan is a predetermined strategy to assess and intervene in a crisis situation, the focus of which is returning the school to normalcy as quickly as possible (Lovre, 2001). However, a plan "is useless without personnel capable of conducting crisis interventions" (Brock, Sandoval & Lewis 2001, p. 52). The crisis response team members are those personnel and their primary responsibility is to implement the response plan when a crisis occurs (Lichtenstein et al., 1994). Team members are trained and prepared to address the emergent psychological needs of students who are experiencing emotional distress (Lerner, Volpe & Lindell, 2003).

Some researchers believe that having principals as trained members of district crisis response teams is considered a necessity (Johnson, 2001;

Lichtenstein et al., 1994; Lovre, 2001). The training grounds leaders in the nuts and bolts of crisis response, providing a deep understanding of what to do when a crisis does occur (Klicker, 2000; Lovre, 2001). Through participating in training and becoming team members, school leaders also begin to break the cycle of silence and isolation perpetrated by the fear of making a bad situation worse or bringing negative attention to themselves or their school (Johnson, 2001; Oates, 1993). Furthermore leaders gain a thorough understanding that the crisis team is intended to support them in their role as the school leader, not take over the school (Johnson, 2001; Lovre, 2001).

### **Not In My House**

Consider this principal's journey. "I didn't want you to come," wryly mumbled the man whose school my crisis response team and I had supported for the past nine hours, following the apparent suicide by a student the night before. Looking a mix of apologetic and free he went on . . . "I didn't want you in my house. You didn't know my kids and my counselors are good, I figured we could handle it. Funny, they said we needed you . . . they were right. You knew I didn't want you huh?" I nodded, and smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really didn't. But I've seen the students come to a different place than they were this morning. It's pretty amazing." "It's what we do," I said. "Thank you for being my right arm today. I didn't even know I needed you, but I don't know what I would have done without you and the team, I will never hesitate again. I will welcome you into my house any time we have a crisis again. I just didn't know how much it mattered."

Wise leaders reflect on their fear of being seen as inadequate. Prior to a crisis they reflect on the impact it might have on students, the school and the school leadership. They also reflect on how they will be viewed in the aftermath of a crisis.

### **Now You Know More**

Leaders are faced with choices daily. You may be nodding in agreement, interested but skeptical, energized, excited and thirsty to know more. Or perhaps you have dismissed this as another pointless attempt to make more work for you; after all you have a school to run. Yes, you do have a school to run and lives to impact. And the choices you make now will do exactly that. What can you do now that you know more?

First, return to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. Make sure you know and are comfortable with your answers to the questions posed. If you don't know, find out! In the event a crisis team does not exist in your district you might consider the following:

1. Advocate for one. Remember it is not if but when a crisis will occur. Start asking around, in all likelihood, there are others who feel the same. You have power to enact change.
2. Take it upon yourself to prepare for these crises in your school. Excellent resources exist on how to put together a school based crisis response team.

3. Meet with key student support personnel in your building, particularly your school counselors. They have unique training to work with students, also your school psychologists, deans of students, and administrative workers. Create an action plan to initiate when you hear about a crisis and make sure everyone has a copy.
4. Conduct in service training with all staff members to help them understand the grieving process and how allowing students time to regain psychological health can positively affect their ability to learn. Provide crisis response resources, practice scenarios together. By doing so, in lieu of potentially promoting inattention, anger and violent behavior, you recreate the fundamental human need for safety and security. Now students can focus on content and learning, not the fear, sadness and anger a crisis may arouse both in the moment and the distant future.

If there is a team, the following suggestions may be of assistance to you:

1. Get trained if you are not already,
2. Support and encourage ongoing training for new members and refreshers for all,
3. Talk to other leaders about the value of crisis response, the effectiveness of the team, and encourage them to be trained. Spreading the word to other leaders is vital; you are their most trusted peers,
4. Conduct in service training with all staff. Despite the presence of a crisis team, it is still necessary for all school personnel to understand the principals behind its utilization, and
5. Create an environment where support in difficult times is the culture of the school.

### **Rudy's Story: First Day on the Job**

This final story illustrates another choice one leader made. What will be yours when the time comes?

After 34 years in education as a teacher and assistant principal, I was finally rewarded with a principalship. I walked into the office at 7:00 am for my first day on the job. The phone rang at 7:05. I was informed that a student at my school had died the night before in a tragic auto accident. Well let me tell you, at the same time panic set in, the thought of timing also ran through my mind . . . I am so glad that I had finally decided to take time to attend the district's crisis team training last month! In that very instant, the training proved its worth more than I can ever say, because I knew what to do and what to expect. I got in contact with the crisis team leader, and a team arrived at my school. They were invaluable. The team not only successfully supported my students as they learned of and processed the death of their peer, but they supported me. I was able to take care of what I needed to, and was able to function effectively as the school leader. If I had not had that training, I would not have known to call for help. I would have tried to handle it on my own, and in retrospect know how potentially damaging that

could be to the students. I think every principal should take crisis team training, and use the resources available to you. Doing so makes you a stronger leader, and in the scope of value to your students' lives is so much more important than one more day of algebra.

## Conclusion

Effective leaders know that it is possible for crises to occur. They also recognize that preparation for their faculty, their staff and themselves is of paramount importance. No one can predict what will happen from day to day; nevertheless, taking steps to insure that potential crises will be handled in a timely and proper manner will be of benefit to all.

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