

Lessons from leading through COVID-19

Secondary principals' perspectives

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KEY POINTS

- Wellbeing was prioritised over learning by secondary principals leading through COVID-19 lockdown and empathy was shown.
- Schools demonstrated community responsiveness by employing multiple communication strategies and tools.
- Leadership was distributed, and positivity and flexibility were demonstrated.
- Lockdown provided a catalyst for change. However, while opportunities to learn from lockdown were taken by some, deliberate and focused reflection was not necessarily widespread.

School principals were required to engage in crisis leadership throughout New Zealand's first COVID-19 Alert Level 4 lockdown that began in March 2020. Eighteen school principals from a range of secondary schools were interviewed about their experiences and the findings of this study are discussed in relation to the leadership capability framework (Education Council, 2018). This research reveals that principals acted with empathy in prioritising wellbeing over learning, demonstrated community responsiveness by using multiple ways of communicating, encouraged collective leadership, led with optimism, demonstrated resilience, and took opportunities to shift practice in their schools.

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand's national lockdown under Alert Level 4 of its COVID-19 response in March 2020 was unprecedented. Schools were expected to move to teaching and learning online with little warning. The crisis required principals to modify their leadership and opened up opportunities to facilitate meaningful educational change. This article reports on the leadership practices of a sample of secondary school principals who were interviewed about their experiences of lockdown and uses the Education Council's (2018) Leadership Capability Framework (LCF) to structure the findings and discussion.

Leading through crisis

The situation facing New Zealand school leaders when the first lockdown was announced fits with the definition of a crisis. It was "an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 58). While many principals would have dealt with trauma and some would have led their schools through previous crises (for example, the Canterbury earthquakes), none would have experienced a prolonged lockdown. Principals faced multiple simultaneous challenges. They had to: physically close down schools not knowing when they would re-open; ensure students had access to devices so that they could continue to learn from home; support teachers to teach online while acknowledging their different personal circumstances; and manage their concern for students, whānau, and wider communities.

A number of authors have considered the demands of crisis leadership, including within educational settings. Kerrissey and Edmondson (2020, p. 3) argue

that crisis leadership under COVID-19 requires leaders to "act in an urgent, honest, and iterative fashion". They also suggest that communicating with transparency, taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems, and engaging in constant updating is required. Mutch's (2020) research summary about schools that have faced disaster situations within and beyond New Zealand highlights the importance of principals being visible, remaining calm, and demonstrating empathy. Koehn (2020, p. 3), who has studied crisis leaders for two decades, describes a successful leadership approach being one in which "brutal honesty" is balanced with "credible hope". In other words, good leaders acknowledge people's fears, then encourage resolve. Good leaders pay attention to wellbeing, and give people a role and purpose while encouraging experimentation and ongoing learning.

Crisis researchers identify common phases that occur across a broad range of disaster responses. For example, Smith and Riley (2012) suggest five steps in schools' response to crises: gathering information; adapting to the situation; making rapid decisions; showing concern; and communicating clearly and openly. They also highlight key leadership attributes such as: strong two-way interpersonal communication skills; the ability to identify key messages from often contradictory information sources; the capacity to empathise and to respect diverse perspectives; a capacity for optimism; flexibility; and the ability to capitalise on opportunities. A more recent framework for leading through crisis described by Breakspear (2020) includes a "crisis phase" in which immediate challenges including wellbeing and equity are addressed, and an "adaptation phase" which involves checking in, communicating often and clearly, and documenting innovations. Lastly, there is an "opportunity phase", in which learning and reflection occur and opportunities are built on. New Zealand crisis researcher Carol Mutch (2020) proposes a more open-ended

crisis cycle and suggests that different school leadership approaches are required in different phases of a crisis.

Research approach

Principals from a diverse range of secondary schools throughout New Zealand were invited by email to participate and sent an information sheet explaining the aim of the study, what participation would involve, the potential outputs, and their rights as participants including confidentiality. The principals approached were selected because of their links to the Masters of Secondary School Leadership programme offered by Victoria University of Wellington. Each was either a former graduate, a principal of a current student, or a host principal for the shadowing element of the programme.

Eighteen principals out of 26 approached agreed to be interviewed by the author and signed consent forms. Interviews took place over Zoom in June and July 2020 and took between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded with transcriptions returned to participants on request. Twelve male and six female participants led schools ranging from decile 1 to 10 serving between 300 to over 3,000 students. Principals came from both single-sex (four) and co-educational schools (14) situated in cities and provincial towns throughout New Zealand.

The interview schedule covered Breakspear's (2020) three phases described above. Specific questions related to the challenges principals faced, how they connected with their communities and other leaders, who inspired or motivated them, and what innovations and opportunities resulted from time in lockdown. Participants were also asked about what leadership lessons they had learned and how leadership was distributed.

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed similarities between the principals' crisis leadership practices and many of the nine capabilities in the LCF (Education Council, 2018). Given the similarities, the nine capabilities will now be used as headings to present the findings. The structure and discussion shows that the practices of principals leading through the COVID-19 crisis reflected the expectations of leadership in the sector, with some capabilities taking on particular significance.

Building and sustaining high trust relationships

According to the LCF (Education Council, 2018), trusting relationships can be built and sustained by respectfully engaging and demonstrating empathy. Trust is also seen as crucial in crisis leadership, with integrity, authenticity, and honesty being important leadership characteristics (Schoenberg, 2005; Wooten & James, 2008). Mutual

trust in an organisation is also likely to support rapid adaptations in crisis situations (Teo et al., 2017).

Principals in this study expressed concerns about the wellbeing of their staff and students and acted in ways that were conducive to building trust. They demonstrated empathy in a variety of ways: from the messages principals sent to their school communities to how they set expectations regarding online teaching and learning. They told me: "It was always wellbeing first. No matter what, everything doesn't matter, just we have to look after each other, and look after the kids, and that was a key message" and "Our messages were always empathy first". The principals had realistic expectations of the learning that would occur and how much work staff could manage. Messages to staff such as "Stay safe, look after yourself, look after your family and do what you can in terms of online learning" and "If in doubt go for kindness and humanity rather than efficiency" reinforced that wellbeing came first. Operating on a high trust model was important to several participants, and one commented that the "high trust model was really well received by our staff and students and the community".

The prioritisation of wellbeing during lockdown was also highlighted in interviews undertaken by the Education Review Office (ERO) between July and August 2020. There, 70% of leaders reported that learning came second to wellbeing (ERO, 2020). One principal in my study told staff with families that: "I want your children to look back on this and say: do you remember that fabulous time when we were all in lockdown together?" demonstrating her compassion for their situation. Empathy was also shown on the return to school. Several principals reassured their student community that keeping safe was what they were asked to do, and they had done that well.

Ensuring culturally responsive practice and understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural heritage, using Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the foundation

Culturally responsive practice involves working closely and collaboratively with families/whānau and ensuring the curriculum supports the cultural heritage of all learners (Education Council, 2018). While the principals in this study were not asked specifically about culturally responsive leadership and Te Tiriti-based leadership practices, they did discuss working closely with their local communities for the benefit of their students. In all cases, communication with families/whānau was more frequent

and focused than usual. This finding is reflected in a Springboard Trust principal survey that reported “strong two-way relationships” (2020, p. 3) with whānau during lockdown. Likewise, the ERO (2020, p. 3) interviews revealed “greater whānau involvement and integration of home and school learning” in some cases.

Many schools used multiple channels including email, newsletters, Facebook, and Google tools to ensure all parents/whānau were kept informed and involved. For those families with access issues, phonecalls home, in some cases to both parents/whānau and students, were made. This increased communication had positive benefits in some cases: “We really noticed that our connection with whānau and kids was far greater at the end than it normally is because of the teachers, I suppose being inside the classroom, inside the house of people.” Similarly, Riwai-Couch et al. (2020), who surveyed parents during the first week of lockdown, found that parents of Māori students felt empowered as they were able to have a greater say in their children’s learning. Their study also found that some parents wanted greater support and guidance from schools to better support learning from home.

A principal at a school with a high proportion of Māori and Pacific students told me that they took lockdown as an opportunity to plan and implement significant changes to their curriculum and timetable. They acknowledged that their prior systems did not reflect their demographic. The endeavoured to “challenge the traditional hierarchies and give voice to the many leaders that were out there in terms of our staff and our students”. Another principal commented: “When you talk about culturally responsive practice, I think we’re living it more now on every given day.”

Building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community

This capability involves leaders and teachers working collegially, inquiring into their practice, and sharing information and knowledge (Education Council, 2018). Principals were asked how leadership was distributed during lockdown, an approach that can be linked to the LCF indicators of drawing on strengths and providing leadership opportunities. Many participants provided examples of how their colleagues stepped up during lockdown, whether they were senior leadership team members, heads of departments, IT specialists, classroom teachers, or pastoral team members. One principal valued that “everyone was willing to drop tools and engage in whatever way was possible so that the sense of urgency and the sense of needing to do stuff now didn’t have to be

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driven”. They noted “greater collaboration between staff and across different learning areas”. Another principal commented that he relied on staff with good ideas as: “I don’t have all the answers. I understand that I’ve got some tremendously talented people out there. And one of my jobs as a leader is to give them their heads.” The importance of drawing on collective leadership is supported by Direen (2017), Mutch (2020), and by Smith and Riley who stress that, in crises, leadership needs to be “distributed and co-ordinated” (Smith and Riley, 2012, p. 66). This focus on collective leadership, particularly in later phases, contrasts with the need for leaders to sometimes make quick decisions without consulting widely in the early crisis stages.

Principals also provided opportunities for teachers to share their learning, particularly in the area of online teaching and learning. Many participants commented on progress made in this area. As one principal said: “I can’t think there would be any other set of circumstances where we would have had such a turbocharged set of professional development.” Another suggested that his school had “advanced 10 years with our IT assimilation”. The reasons behind a shift were summarised by one principal: “It was the just-in-time professional learning for teachers with a real-life problem to solve, which makes a huge difference.”

Strategically thinking and planning

Strategic thinking and planning involves ensuring that a school’s vision, goals, and expectations are developed and shared with all stakeholders, as well as being regularly reviewed (Education Council, 2018). Lockdown provided opportunities for principals to think strategically and plan ahead after the initial phase of reacting to the crisis as the following comments illustrate:

It got to the point where we’re having quite strategic conversations ... you’re actually talking and reflecting on

teaching and learning and how we can move the school forward rapidly as a result of this, so really positive from our leadership perspective.

Lockdown was a real period of reflection time as well.

Particularly with our senior leadership team, we had a lot of time to think about the pathway, the journey we're on and why and how we were doing things and how do we build back better?

Maintaining a dual awareness of strategic issues and operational matters is key to crisis leadership (Boin et al., 2013). The Springboard Trust (2020) report highlighted principals' concern about the relevance of schools' strategic planning following lockdown. One participant also noted the juxtaposition between pre- and post-lockdown with their comment that: "What our vision was before lockdown has changed because the world's changed." Mutch (2020, p. 7) emphasises the importance of principals "providing a vision of a positive future along with consultation on a plan of how to get there" and some principals in this study were able to explain how they had done this.

Evaluating practices in relation to outcomes

The LCF evaluation capability involves gathering information and analysing practice (Education Council, 2018). Principals interviewed gathered information from staff, students, and parents/whānau in a variety of ways during lockdown. Many schools surveyed students to ascertain who lacked devices or internet access. Many also gathered student voice about the form and expectations of online teaching and learning, making adjustments in response. For example:

Getting that good feedback from Survey Monkey on a regular weekly basis from parents, staff and students just helped inform us with our decision making.

The staff voice and the student voice was really important around that, to help us try and just change and adapt as we were working through that lockdown period, not be too wedded to the guidelines we set up.

While surveys were used by many, one principal of a low-decile school chose a more personal approach. Teachers phoned each family before the return to school: "We asked them about how it had been for them, what they'd found positive, what they'd found really hard, what they'd learned from it, what they thought the school could take away from it." Another school videoed students being interviewed about their experiences.

All principals expressed ideas about how they were going to build on the opportunities that lockdown provided. Ideas included using videoconferencing for some student assemblies, as well as meetings with

boards of trustees, parents, property teams, and staff.

Principals looked towards revising timetables, providing opportunities for senior students to learn from home, fast-tracking planned innovations, using learning data more effectively, and further embedding the use of technology in teaching and learning.

A crisis can be a powerful trigger for learning and change. Wang (2008) advocates that learning be incorporated into each stage of a crisis-management process to help organisations recognise, prevent, plan for crises, and to cope better. It has, however, been suggested that most organisations do not pay enough attention to the learning phase of crisis leadership (Bhaduri, 2019). While all principals could articulate opportunities, only a few reported creating a structured space for themselves or their staff to reflect and learn from the lockdown experience. Mutch (2020) proposes questions for New Zealand principals to reflect on after the COVID-19 closures, including: "How well did they use the potential within their teams, schools, communities and networks? What are their leadership strengths, individually and collectively, and where might improvements be made?" (p. 9).

Adept management of resources to achieve vision and goals

Adept management of resources involves making well-informed decisions, understanding legal and national frameworks, ensuring staff feel valued and supported, and using networks to gather resources (Education Council, 2018). The following comment illustrates the desire of one principal participant to ensure her decisions were well informed:

I'm going to make sure I read everything I can, I'm going to listen to everything that is said at governmental level, I'm going to be on that COVID-19 site, I'm going to get all my information from reputable sources, and then I will make the best decisions I can based on that information, and that's all you can do.

Flexible and adaptive responses in times of crisis can be supported by drawing on expert advisers and seeking diverse opinions (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020). Principals relied on the frequent messaging from the Ministry of Education to support their decision making. Most found this very useful and passed on the key messages to staff and the wider community where relevant. Mutch (2020) highlighted principals' important role tailoring information before sending it on to relevant groups, a strategy well used by principals in this study. As mentioned earlier, various communication channels were used, and according to one principal, "it was literally whatever worked". Targeted messaging was also

reported in the Springboard Trust (2020) survey, which reinforced that the different media suited different groups and communities. The value of effective communication has been highlighted by Smith and Riley (2012, p. 68) as “the key attribute through which the leader can provide direction, certainty and optimism during a crisis” and Wooten and James (2008) stress the importance of leadership providing reassurance by connecting psychologically and emotionally.

Redeployment of staff with Kāhui Ako roles to mentor students who were struggling with their learning was another example of adept management of resources. Support and professional staff were also involved in contacting students who were not engaged. Almost half the principals reported liaising with other community groups to ensure their students were fed and kept safe.

Attending to their own learning as leaders and their own wellbeing

Principals in this study attended to their own learning and wellbeing in ways that aligned with the LCF indicators: seeking feedback; keeping abreast of new evidence; reflecting on leadership practice; using critical friends; and maintaining personal wellbeing (Education Council, 2018). As mentioned earlier, feedback was sought from a variety of groups and several principals reported feeling more strongly connected to both parents/whānau and students through regular contact. Many participants also kept up with their reading and reflection by taking advantage of networking opportunities, which will be discussed in more detail below.

A number of the participants commented that, despite challenges, they found aspects of lockdown enjoyable. They appreciated spending more time with their families, getting more exercise, and being able to focus on one thing at a time. As one said: “Your job is so complex and you have so many balls juggling in the air that to just be focused on one kind of thing for a period of time was quite enjoyable.” Another noted that lockdown enabled him to “get a bit of balance back and the job lacks balance”.

Koehn (2020) has emphasised the importance of taking care of yourself while leading through a crisis as if the leader can’t sustain their energy then the organisation becomes vulnerable. This approach was taken by one principal who reflected:

I think the main thing was accepting that this was so much bigger than just our school, and therefore we couldn’t control it, we can respond to it but I didn’t want to personally absorb all of that otherwise I would have been no good as well.

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Embodying the organisation’s values, and showing moral purpose, optimism, agency, and resilience

This capability, which involves embodying values and demonstrating courage, optimism, and resilience (Education Council, 2018), was of great relevance before, during, and after lockdown. Smith and Riley (2012) describe school leadership in a crisis as “providing certainty, engendering hope, engaging a rallying point for effective and efficient effort” (p. 57). They also highlight the importance of tenacity and optimism. Similarly, Mutch (2020, p. 9) suggests that schools can “model how to move forward with purpose and hope”. Fostering optimism and resilience was also key, as shown by the following examples:

Keeping your team with you and keeping them feeling good about what they’re doing, keeping them motivated.

You had a really important role to be playing in your community and you needed to be offering reassurances to them around education and the wellbeing of the young people.

If I stayed calm, I could help keep everybody else calm.

Several of the principals referred to how their school values guided them over this time. One principal described how lockdown was a test of the school’s “embedded culture of moral purpose” and appreciated how everyone took responsibility for doing their jobs. Two principals specifically mentioned that resilience was one of their school values and one discussed how they were building on the theme of resilient students by encouraging them to express gratitude: “We’ve embraced this, this has been amazing and also we can be very proud of our country and where we live and grateful.”

The above examples highlight how the leaders used relational connections to help build resilience (Teo et al., 2017). Boin et al. (2013) emphasise that ongoing resilience can be built by engaging in crisis preparation and learning from the past; similarly, Wooten and James (2008) suggest that resiliency results when organisations learn and make improvements as a result of crisis.

Contributing to the development and wellbeing of education beyond their organisation

Characteristics of this capability include active involvement in networks and contributing to building of knowledge about how to lead in complex situations (Education Council, 2018). The value of networks for making sense and meaning of crisis situations has also been emphasised by Teo et al. (2017) and this certainly seems to have been the case throughout lockdown. Indeed, principals who led through the Christchurch earthquakes highly valued their networks and reported that networks were a critical factor in how well they coped (Direen, 2017).

All participants in this study also mentioned networks that supported them during the COVID-19 lockdown, including formal and informal secondary principals' networks at both national and local levels as well as interactions with Kāhui Ako colleagues. Principals valued the opportunity to exchange ideas and resources such as role descriptions and policies: "It was just really helpful to hear what other people were doing and you didn't feel like you're on your own and having to work it all out for yourself. That made a big difference definitely." Several principals commented that local networks also ensured consistent messages, as the following comment shows: "The community got good solid messages from all of us so I think they kept things really calm and steady as well."

Conclusion

Secondary principals leading through the first COVID-19 lockdown who participated in this study demonstrated aspects of all of the LCF capabilities, highlighting the usefulness of the framework as a tool for reflecting on leadership practice during crisis. The period of lockdown, while extremely challenging for school communities, provided opportunities for principals, alongside their senior leadership teams and school communities, to reflect on and rethink their practices. While many of the leadership approaches used during lockdown were similar to business as usual, there were four related areas in which crisis leadership appeared to differ from the usual expectations of school principals. Each of these has implications for the sorts of leadership practices that might

enhance resilience to manage future crises, including rising COVID-19 alert levels, for both leaders and teachers:

- First, prioritising wellbeing by demonstrating empathy and developing a greater understanding of the personal circumstances of both students and staff and their whānau.
- Secondly, engaging in more frequent and focused communication and demonstrating awareness of what media are appropriate for the different stakeholder groups.
- Thirdly, overtly demonstrating positivity, flexibility, and optimism thereby strengthening relationships and enhancing resilience.
- Finally, purposefully prioritising time for focused and collaborative reflection to support the process of capitalising on opportunities arising from a crisis, leading to meaningful change.

This study contributes to our understanding of effective crisis leadership strategies, especially given the unfolding pandemic situation. These crisis leadership practices are not exclusive to principals and the findings may encourage other leaders and leadership development providers as well as principals to consider how to prioritise wellbeing, communicate more frequently and effectively using a range of media, model resilience and positivity, and reflect on and learn from challenges and opportunities when facing future crises.

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