



Coping with a crisis

Dennis Sleigh on what to do when trouble arrives

What do you do when a student discovers a corpse hanging from a tree in your school playground?

You draw on every professional fibre in your body and you start to understand the meaning of multi-tasking. You hope that your actions and reactions will somehow compensate for this tragedy in a manner that will minimise the trauma for your students, and you also spare more than a cursory thought for the poor individual whose life ended so tragically. That, anyway, is how I responded.

I'd like to say that this introduction was simply a dramatic attention-grabber, but it is all true. The theme of this article, and the other three planned for this year, is *the way we deal with crises*. As I move through this story, I will try to be as calm and objective as I can be, but you should know from the start that when we discuss situations of this nature, there are many people in any educational system who have their own stories to tell, their own experiences to relive, and therefore the cold words on a page might take on a heat of their own, an emotive force that will be real for some, not for others. Wherever you stand in this continuum of readers, I want you to realise this topic is not just dry policy, but fundamental and important information of potential relevance to every educator.

What happened?

Memories of that fresh morning in Canberra will never leave me, and I replay them often, usually not willingly, whenever I think about how to deal with a disaster. With my assistant principal, I had just gone out to the playground to assist the duty teacher because today was our sports carnival and I thought some extra staff might reduce any undue exuberance on the oval. We were walking out the door together when we received the first garbled message indicating that something was dreadfully wrong: someone was hanging from a tree. The teacher on duty had acted very sensibly, sending for help while making sure that the rest of the early arrivals were kept away from the scene. As we came to grips with events, we called for extra staff, and all children were marshalled into the school. Fortunately the scene of the tragedy was partly concealed and one of our priorities was to summon expert help while also hosing down any horrific tales that were being developed by those few students who had actually caught a glimpse of the horror.



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Medical support and the police were promptly called and their help was superb. This left us able to concentrate on dealing with the school community, and we briefed the staff on what had happened and what we wanted them to say to their classes. We quickly devised a script for them to follow and asked each teacher to take their class to their room. We opted for this rather than speaking to the assembled school in our hall because we wanted everyone to have the chance to deal with the issue as personally as possible. The cooperation of the teaching staff was magnificent as was the help given by the school support staff. The secretary called our system-level counselling service and also the head office, to ensure that everyone who needed to know was informed. Meanwhile, basic support was offered to those most traumatised by the event.

We were fortunate that we were all scheduled to leave the school grounds for a sports carnival and we decided to go ahead with this. Not only did this remove the students from the site, but it also gave the opportunity to those who wanted to talk about it to do so; at the same time, those who didn't want to talk were given that freedom. I shudder when I think about dealing with an issue like this if everyone is in class, perhaps locked into a single response mode regardless of their own needs.

The empathy shown by our system leaders was a very important factor from the start, highlighting the value of having others to turn to. Most of us are totally inexperienced in these dramatic events and having others to call on increases the chances of thinking about essential steps that might otherwise be overlooked.

The next issue, having dealt as effectively as we could with the victim, the students and the staff, was to offer assistance to the parents. Some of them were already aware of the vague details – they had been dropping off children when the body was discovered or they were at the sports carnival with their children – and we knew that calls would soon start to arrive. The office staffers were briefed and they were delegated to deal with problems as far as possible; in the event, they were able to satisfy almost all callers, and they quickly directed others to me so that no-one was left unaided.

I then contacted a very skilled parent – a former journalist – and between us we drafted a letter to parents to explain what had happened, what had been done about it, and what support would be offered by the school in coming days. Many parents later reported that this letter had made all the difference as they tried to come to grips with the stories brought home by their children that day.

Naturally, the crisis did not end there – there were traumatised people to deal with, inquests to be conducted, actions to be reviewed – but I think you can see enough to realise that this experience had many lessons to teach us all.

What did we learn?

A few years before this incident occurred, I had worked with a graduate class on the development of a critical incident policy. I would like to think that this experience with a number of very skilled educators had given me a background that helped prepare me for this event. I know that without this policy development process, I would have been far less confident to handle our crisis.

The most obvious lesson, I suspect, that came from this experience was that if you have a good team – executive staff, teachers, support staff, parents – it is much easier to deal with whatever challenges come your way. I am not sure that the contribution of some key people was ever fully acknowledged and I suspect that more post-trauma support could have been made available for them, but I certainly know that their contribution made all the difference on the day.

Of course, having a policy framework and

having a good staff are obvious advantages. What else is needed to allow a school to move through a disaster without exacerbating the situation?

Perhaps the answer to the question can be summed up in five words: *Awareness, Promptness, Openness, Communication* and *Concern*. Let's look at each of these to see their impact and to confirm their value in other situations.

Awareness

First of all you must know what is going on. This is an obvious inclusion but it is not always considered. Basically, you cannot deal with a crisis unless you know what is happening. The facts you need might not all be present at the outset – in the case described here, details became clearer as the morning progressed – but you really need to have a thorough overview. In a later article in this series, I want to talk about some well-known tragedies that have struck schools and in some of these cases it was not immediately clear what was going on. Predictably, this ignorance led to some mistakes being made and some solutions being overlooked.

Promptness

While speed can be a negative quality if we rush in “where angels fear to tread”, there is very little to be gained from protracted delays. We have probably all seen situations where the apparent reluctance of a leadership team to respond leaves people thinking that the authorities are incompetent or uncaring. The widespread claims of incompetence by President George W Bush after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina arose because he was seen as not acting promptly enough. The widely lauded actions of New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani after September 11 offer a brilliant contrast.

Openness

It is tempting to think that if we can control information flow, we are likely to minimise rumours or exaggerations. Sadly, this is rarely the case. In the absence of hard data, the stakeholders will create their own. I could not ignore the fact that at least a handful of my students were aware that a body was hanging from a tree in our grounds. At first I didn't know exactly who had seen what, or who had heard about it second hand. Therefore, I had to be as open as I could in discussing the matter with the students. I asked staff, when talking about the matter, not to embellish what I had told them nor to disguise the reality, and to make sure that if students had any questions, they should answer them as simply and briefly as possible. I was very proud of the way they handled this, because we were all upset.

Communication

This is closely linked to openness, of course, and I cannot stress too strongly that when we start to communicate with our stakeholders, we must be open. However, effective communication has

other features as well. It needs to be succinct, simple, honest and, above all, informative. These days it seems to be increasingly hard to find communications that meet these criteria. I suppose we have become so used to the typical political statements, whether from our elected representatives or from their senior public servants, that we almost overlook the obscurantist texts that often pass as communiqués. *They are heavy on words and light on message*. Our communication cannot be like that if we are trying to explain how we have coped with a crisis. Parents want to know what risk their children have been exposed to, and how we have minimised this risk, so let's be straightforward when we tell them.

Concern

No matter what we do when confronted by a crisis, the one feature that must be present in our behaviour must be concern – concern for the children in our care, the staff in our school, the parents and others who depend on us. If we make some mistakes – and the bigger the crisis, the greater the chance that we will make some errors – people will forgive us and write them off as long as they know that we really cared for those whom we are called to serve.

We manifest this genuine concern – and unless it is genuine we shouldn't waste our time – by reminding ourselves that parents are naturally anxious about the wellbeing of their children, and want to know anything that impacts on that well-being. If we engage parents in a caring conversation, they will usually respond appropriately and receive our communications in the spirit in which they are given.

An end-thought

There is no way to crisis-proof your school or to prepare yourself for every event that might occur. In one school the crisis might be might be an armed intruder, in another a crashed petrol tanker on the road outside; in a third it might be the sudden death of a student or in another, a break-in by vandals over the weekend. Not all crises are huge but all of them impact on the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff. Therefore, it is essential that all schools have an appropriate response plan to follow when the unexpected happens. If we do, we are far less likely to be thrown by the unknown, and those in our care are much more likely to get through the crisis relatively unscathed. Really, we can ask for little more.



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