Leadership Through a School Tragedy: A Case Study (Part 1 - The First Week)

Ruth Tarrant

Joint Centre for Disaster Research,
Massey University / GNS(Science).

Author correspondence:
Ruth Tarrant, Joint Centre for Disaster Research,
Massey University / GNS(Science),Wellington,
New Zealand.
Email: R.A.Tarrant@massey.ac.nz

Abstract

The present study investigates the principal's leadership through a crisis in a New Zealand school where six Year-12 students and a teacher lost their lives in a river canyoning tragedy while attending an outdoor education camp. The principal was interviewed two years after the event. The study discusses strategies the school used to assist students, their families, and staff following the tragedy, and identifies areas where greater preparation and planning would be beneficial in crisis leadership and management for their school in the future. The principal had not been trained in crisis leadership, and there were no concise and readily available guiding documents available to him in the early phase of the crisis. It is recommended that such documents are developed for use by New Zealand school principals.

The study is presented in two parts: Part 1 (essentially, the first week) covers: first steps; guidelines and support available to the principal; needs of the school; initial responses to student- and staff-grief; and managing relationships. (Part 2 covers the next two years, and should be read in association with Part 1).

Keywords: leadership, school, tragedy, crisis, psychosocial, grief

Background

On April 15, 2008, six Year-12 students (aged 16-17 years) and one teacher (aged 29 years) from Elim Christian College (ECC), Auckland, New Zealand, lost their lives in a river canyoning tragedy. Students were attending an outdoor education programme provided by the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre (OPC), at Mangatepopo in the central North Island of New Zealand. The river rose rapidly after heavy rain, stranding the canyoning group on a ledge above the water. An attempt to leave the ledge and exit the river before the river rose further resulted in multiple loss of life. The canyoning group comprised 10 people: eight students; one teacher; and an instructor employed by the outdoor education centre. Two students and the instructor survived the activity. In total, 40 Year-12 students from the school were attending the outdoor education programme, planned to have been held over five days.

There was considerable media coverage of interest and concern to New Zealand and beyond in the days immediately following the tragedy. Since that time, the media has continued to follow related events such as the first anniversary of the tragedy and proceedings of official enquiries. Coverage of the tragedy has included interviews of the school principal, Mr Murray Burton (MB), for television, radio, and the print media in the days immediately after the tragedy, and at various times in the two years since. A parent who had himself lost a child in the tragedy has also spoken to the media several times. At no time when speaking to the media did the school principal, a parent, or a member of the Board of Trustees (i.e., the school governance body) attribute any blame for the tragedy; attributing cause was left to official enquiries. Through the media, the school consistently showed compassion for the grieving families, appreciation to the police and other supporting agencies, respect toward the outdoor education centre where the tragedy occurred, and concern for the students, parents, and friends and supporters of the school.

Introduction

Leaders in traumatic events

Although leaders are subject to the same physiological responses as other people when confronted with a sudden crisis or shocking news, people generally expect leaders to control themselves and the situation, and to behave rationally (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Rational behaviour is by definition reason-based, calling on logical argument, McKenna, Rooney, and Boal (2009) stating that "wise" leaders reach better decisions through careful and logical reasoning. Mumford, Friedrich,

Caughron, and Byrne (2007) point out that context is an important factor in leader-performance. For instance, under stressful conditions, the application of abstract cognitive concepts can become inhibited if attention is divided or distracted from the task in hand. Mumford et al. go on to state that it becomes increasingly difficult to appraise likely outcomes of particular decisions in a context of complexity and ambiguity, stressing the role of mental processes involved in processing and using information.

Connelly, Gilbert, Zaccaro, Threlfall, Marks, & Mumford (2000) identified three key variables in effective leaders: creative thinking, social judgement skills, and complex problem-solving skills. In problem-solving, McKenna, Rooney, and Boal (2009) assert the need to consider subjective information alongside the objective, this consideration possibly influencing decisions involving humane or practical solutions and outcomes that are socially desirable. McKenna et al. assert there are non-rational aspects of wise decision-making that might be referred to as gut feelings or gut decisions, and that this sensate intuition can be valuable when making decisions. These authors assert that gut feelings include "insight, imagination, and foresight" (p. 178), responses that are not verified by any immediate, objective information, and that do not occur within a consciously rational process of decision-making. Also recognising that some decisions arise from unconscious information, Voltz and Cramon (2006) suggest that gut feelings might be explained from an information processing perspective. That is, particular situational cues automatically activate a wide network of prior experience related to the specific situation to provide a perception of situational coherence that the person cannot immediately explain. Thus, such perspectives are often described as "feelings" about the particular situation.

Leadership requires building effective relationships with team members. In a study investigating group performance, under task- and relationship-oriented leaders, Tabernero, Chambel and Curral, and Aran (2009) demonstrated that greater group cohesion was achieved by relationship-oriented leadership. Of the various leadership styles and their particular components or foci, the most effective leadership style in an organisation is one that is high on both task orientation and interpersonal orientation (Hutchinson, Valentino, & Kirkner, 1998). This view brings together a focus on achieving the desired task outcomes while

also attending to the needs of individuals implicated in the decisions or outcomes.

The present study investigates the school principal's leadership and management of a traumatic event from the night the tragedy started to unfold, and through the two following years. It was expected that an interview with the principal might illuminate issues such as: first steps in dealing with a school tragedy; the types of protocol-guidelines and support available to school principals; grief-support for children, families, and staff; identification of school requirements in a crisis; managing relationships; tributes and memorials; issues of safety; and care of the leader. The study discusses strategies the school used to assist students, their families, and staff following the tragedy, and identifies areas where greater preparation and planning would be beneficial in crisis leadership and management for their school in the future. It was expected that findings from the study would ultimately serve to benefit other school principals faced with a crisis involving loss of life, and broaden psychosocial understanding of disaster leadership and management.

Part 1 covers: first steps; guidelines and support available to the principal; needs of the school; initial responses to student- and staff-grief; and managing relationships. (Part 2 covers: support for the school; grief-support for families; tributes and memorials; and looking after the leader.)

Method

Participant
The principal, Murray Burton (MB) of Elim Christian College (ECC) was interviewed. MB was invited to talk about his leadership and management of the school from the perspective of his own experience from the time of the disaster to the present day. This approach was encouraged in the first instance, as the researcher did not want to impose questions or themes regarding leadership but, rather, wished to hear MB's personal account.

At the time of the interview (almost two years after the tragedy), MB had been principal of ECC for seven years and was still in the position. At the time of the tragedy (April 15, 2008), ECC had a roll of 540 students from Years 1-13. In total, MB had been a teacher for 28 years, 21 of those as a principal. MB had also undertaken various leadership roles in churches over a period of 25 years. At the time of the tragedy, MB was aged 50 years.

The interview

For the first hour and a half of the two-hour interview, MB, an articulate and focused speaker, used prepared notes to talk about his leadership and management of aspects of the tragedy, and he spoke with few interruptions from the interviewer, those being requests for clarification or repetition. The last half hour of the interview was semi-structured, comprising discussion of questions that had not already been addressed by the interviewee in the first part of the interview, and further development of topics MB had mentioned earlier in the interview.

MB was open in his account of events, describing how he and his support team acted and reacted as the tragedy unfolded, and how he dealt with the many and various issues that arose immediately, and later in the aftermath of the tragedy. MB recounted the events chronologically, interweaving the strategies he and his team used to deal with each aspect of the sequence of events as they arose, at first minute by minute, then hour by hour, day by day, and then across the months until the present time (two years after the tragedy).

The interview was recorded. Toward the end of the data analysis, MB was contacted again to clarify several items in the interview-material.

Analysis and analytical procedure

Data were transcribed verbatim, and the script was checked twice against the recording. The transcription included prosodic elements, but did not require detailed elements of linguistic analysis such as length of pauses typical of conversation analysis.

In the first instance, there was no presumed or pre-existing coding frame, no set of hypotheses, and no assumed sub-topics for the investigation, as such assumptions may have missed out important parts of the principal's experience. Instead, an inductive approach was appropriate for the present study as this allowed themes to be firmly linked to the data, the data themselves driving the analysis. MB chose to discuss what he perceived to be pertinent aspects of his leadership through the tragedy, and how these aspects impacted on the school. In this respect, MB himself selected a number of the themes identified in the present analysis.

The transcribed data were analysed using a thematic analysis, material being organised into recurrent themes identified within the data. Direct quotations illustrate the various themes. First-order coding was used to organise and categorise the data, as the focus of the study was to examine explicit meaning through a semantic approach, the focus of the interview being to gain a sense of the principal's course of action, and the reasons for his decision-making as he led ECC through the tragedy. Codes were created according to sub-topics within the material, and then sub-topics were organised into identified themes.

One of the advantages of using thematic analysis is its theoretical freedom, and potential to provide a rich account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis of the present study allowed an essentialist or realist view of the data to report the experiences of the interviewee from a practical and personal perspective. Braun and Clarke point out that such an approach provides a further advantage of thematic analysis in its utility to gather information that can inform policy development. This had relevance for the present study, given that an analysis of experiential information would be offered for publication, and would be made available to relevant New Zealand government agencies (e.g. Ministry of Education; Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management) for their consideration in developing or modifying policy and practice guidelines.

Identified themes were investigated in relation to recent literature concerning crisis leadership and management, and considered in terms of their broader meanings and implications for principals dealing with a tragedy in their school.

Results and Discussion

To provide a coherent context for the material in this section, a brief chronological outline of events is included where appropriate.

Managing information

Between 5 and 6pm on April 15, 2008 as the principal, MB, was about to leave his school office to go home, one of the ECC teachers at the outdoor education camp at Mangatepopo phoned MB at school and told him that a group of students on a river canyoning experience was overdue, and that a rescue-party had been sent out to pick up the students and bring them back to base.

I didn't think too much about it [at first – but then] I thought it's very unusual that one of my teachers would call me here to tell me about a very practical management issue at a camp. So I came back to my seat.

This initial phone call was the first of many fragments of information that MB received and which he had to piece together over the next six hours as the situation unfolded into a clear understanding of how many people had lost their lives, and who those people were.

Within three or four minutes of that first phone call from the teacher at the outdoor education centre, parents, members of the Board of Trustees, and the senior church minister started to phone MB at school. Unbeknown to MB, news of the tragedy had just appeared on the television News at 6pm. The Police had not yet reported to MB, and the delay in reporting meant that MB could not verify anything that the concerned parents and others were asking him. Over the next few hours, the police necessarily required time to process and confirm information before it could be passed on to the principal and, ultimately, to the families. However, the speed at which this could be achieved by the police resulted in a lengthy and anxious wait for the school and families throughout the evening.

During this time, MB had to lead the situation from his office, five hours by road away from the site of the tragedy. The climate for most of the evening was one of a developing traumatic situation, with uncertainty, incomplete information coming in from time to time, and urgent requests for answers from concerned parents. MB's leadership required a high focus on the task of clarifying the situation and taking appropriate action, and responding to enquiries from the people involved.

I think one of the classic things for a leader [in] all of these things is not knowing [what's happening, or what the process should be], but you still have to lead anyway.

On the night of the tragedy, MB had begun a task that was to become a priority for him for many months to come, and which would still require his attention two years later.

A multi-skilled support team
Within a few minutes of the first phone call and news of the tragedy breaking on the national television news, without prompting MB's essential leadership support team began to gather in his office. The team comprised the school's deputy principal, the assistant principal, the girls' dean, the boys' dean, the principal's executive officer, and the Chair of the Board of Trustees. These people all knew the students and were experienced in their own fields of work as educational leaders.

Also, on the night of the tragedy, the school contacted Roger Phillipson (RP) a member of the Ministry of Education's Traumatic Incident (TI) response team, and RP came straight over to the school that night, beginning what was to become an extended relationship with the school. RP is an educational psychologist and coordinates a TI team at the Ministry. In a critical situation where people are dealing with trauma and uncertainty, the decision-making team is likely to require people with a range of relevant skills, with some of those people probably being required to provide support for some time after the event as well.

RP has become a firm friend. He's been with us for two years now.

Since the night of the tragedy, the support team has widened to include members of the Board of Trustees, who have provided "unwavering support – freely sharing their expertise and corporate acumen." At times, a number of other people have also assisted the school with their particular experience and expertise. For example, Victim Support has assisted the school on several occasions, and Seasons grief support arranged for and held sessions for the grieving families. (Victim Support and Seasons are discussed in Part 2.)

Given that leaders depend on others to assist them in their tasks, that individuals in an organisation frequently work in teams, and that in a crisis a team approach will likely be inevitable, it is important to build strong teams in organisations so they can respond to a demanding situation at any time. Klein, DiazGranados, Salas, Le, Burke, and Lyons and Goodwin (2009) suggest that team strength can be built within an organisation through developing four key components within the group: goal-setting; role-clarification; problem solving; and interpersonal relations. Klein et al. state that goal-setting and role-clarification have the greatest effect on team outcomes.

The Police
When the police officer in charge of the rescue and recovery at Mangatepopo first contacted MB, he informed MB that he would be his only point of contact with the police that night, and that MB could not pass on information unless he (the officer) gave him permission to do so. This put limitations on MB's access to the police, and on his ability to pass on information to anxious parents. Even as media reports came in of how many lives had been lost, the police had not yet confirmed this with MB, and again MB had no way of

immediately substantiating this information for anxious parents whose children were at the camp.

Throughout the unravelling of the disaster, the tragedy, the police were always one step behind the media, and therefore we were one step back again. This put me into ... a difficult situation. Parents ... were hearing things that [I couldn't] substantiate. We had media reports coming through about how many had passed away ... and we had no way of really substantiating that immediately.

We just had to listen to what everybody was hearing and try to filter, literally filter what you think would be the facts - so I guess from 6 o'clock through to about 8.15pm it was purely conjecture.

As information came in from the police, it continued to be incomplete. At 8.15pm, more than two hours after the news broke on television, the police officer phoned MB to report that at that stage he could definitely tell MB that they had lost four students. MB and members of the support group were now reacting to tragic news, but with the knowledge that further deaths could yet be reported.

And I'll never forget those words as long as I live. The emotion that rippled around this office was absolutely unbelievable.... It's not til you actually hear the words "passed away" or "death" that you realise that things have changed for ever. And, just getting my mind around the fact that four healthy Year-12 students were actually dead ... it was just trying to get your head around - they are actually dead.

Still, MB was told not to pass on this information at this time. In what was now a traumatic context, MB and his support team were needing to respond in ways that would help clarify the situation, while giving thought to the next necessary steps. So, at this stage MB was dealing with a highly emotional situation, with only incomplete information available, with continuing delays in receiving information, uncertainty, phone calls from concerned parents, and requests from the police to withhold information from parents and concerned others. Now, MB was having to lead his support team through a serious and developing situation, a type of situation in which he had had no previous experience.

I've never been down this track before; I've got no idea.

MB was "reacting as events developed."

I had no crisis management plan. I had the [first]phone call, people came, and really it was – a lot of listening,

a lot of thinking and working out how best to juggle all the balls in the air as we went through ... that first night til about 2.30 [am].

So we were [trying to] work out which of the 40 students were back at base, and which party was actually in the gorge that day. ... Over that night of course, we were gradually working out who had perished and who had not.

... The identification process was long and laboured; then they [the police] had to relay to Auckland Central [Police]... and it wasn't until two-ish in the morning that families actually got told.

MB acknowledged the work of the police, and realised the need for thorough police processes and procedures, but for the school and families involved in this event, the uncertainty and lengthy waiting time resulted in considerable distress. In respect of how improvements might be made in a similar situation in the future, MB makes the following observation concerning police liaison with the school:

I think if I were to ask the Police to do one thing, it would be to station a member of their establishment here in my office – to actually help filter everything - even though they were brilliant.

A timing problem with the police

By midnight, the police had confirmed, with MB, the names of all six students and the teacher who had lost their lives. However, the police were still to visit the homes of all the families who had lost loved ones to inform them. At 2.30 am MB arrived at his own home and, assuming the police would have visited all the families by that time, began to phone each of the families to speak with them before going to bed. On his second phone call, MB unwittingly informed a family of their son's death before the police had arrived. This was most disturbing for MB who felt "terrible" that the family had received such news by phone, and that he, MB, had unintentionally breached police protocol by releasing this information ahead of the police. Unbeknown to MB, the police had assigned only one officer to go to all seven families, spread across the south-east of Auckland, and the officer had not reached all the families by 2.30 am.

In respect of informing families in situations where there are multiple deaths within a particular group, MB suggests the following:

My advice would be [to] get three or four officers together and ... do this over a 30-minute period, because you're dealing with a close knit community. You're dealing with a group ... who had been talking [amongst themselves]all night.

The media

MB acknowledged that the media had a role to play in taking news to the country at large where people would inevitably be concerned at the loss of so many young lives at a school's outdoor education camp. When the media approached the school, MB was prepared to co-operate with them wherever possible.

I don't know how the whole media thing happened, but ... it is sometimes very much a gut instinct. If we did get it right, [it] is to recognise that the media have a part to play and they have a story to tell .... I'm a principal of a school, an integrated school, so I'm accountable to my community. Being accountable is being available ... to consult and to listen. And the media in a sense reflect - represent - the wider community. It's a matter of actually working alongside them really.

The media first came to the church, adjacent to the school, late on the night of the tragedy (about 11pm) where about three or four hundred teenagers from the school and wider community had gathered for prayer and support. MB told the media he could not speak to them that night as the school did not have enough information at that point. However, he indicated his willingness to co-operate with the media first thing the next morning. The media agreed. At the first media conference in the morning, MB talked to the media about their access to the school, as well as the school's wish for particular limits on media access.

When you are dealing with the media, you say: Yes, we can work with you, but here's how we would like to do it. You give them [something of use to them], but you also tell them there has to be ... a boundary around it.

After we had done our press conference, we had this [school] assembly. The media wanted to come to the assembly ... but I said to them, You can come in for the first part where I welcome everyone and I pray, and then when I start to talk ... about who we have lost, where it happened and all that sort of thing, that's family stuff and I want you to withdraw for that, and then we'll meet you later.

They [the media] were happy because they got an entry, and some footage, and then they retreated, and they knew they could get me aside later.... It worked really well.

Working with the media was, once again, a new experience for MB, and required reactive leadership in a demanding and now publically visible situation for which he had not been trained.

I'm not trained in the media, and most principals or organisational leaders probably have little to do with the media until [something goes wrong], but once again, you back yourself in terms of being able to speak to them and work with them.

MB gave a clear message to his staff about contact with the media:

[The staff] knew that I was the only one speaking to the media, and they deferred all media comment to me.

MB said that by allowing the media into the school, the media "treated [them] incredibly well."

I think ... certainly do everything to get yourself on board with them, and work with them in partnership, rather than keeping them out.

The school's partnership with the media was extended by the church who served the media with refreshments (a new but welcome experience for the media) as the media visited the chapel to observe, and to gather material for their news reports.

[The media told the story] over and over again to the watching world, and it was the world really, and so it really, really did help us....

As a result of the media-publicity, the school was offered support from a range of sources (discussed in Part 2), and Christians around the country prayed for the school and families.

A less successful media decision

MB spoke of a "classic mistake" he made with the print media several weeks after the tragedy. A women's magazine rang him and asked if they could do an interview with the two surviving girls who had been pulled from the water. The girls and their parents agreed to the interview, but MB felt the experience proved too great a demand on these Year 12 students at this stage and in such a context.

Even though I had the parents' permission, I felt it was just too much for the girls. ... It turned out to be almost too intense for words.... And I didn't realise how intense it would be when these girls started to talk for the first

time to people beyond their family. [The girls] had been through their interviews with the police and through the Department of Labour and that sort of thing, but it just seemed to not work. And so I think that was a big mistake. ... I just felt I'd overstepped my mark as the principal.

Reactive leadership

MB stated that from the earliest stages of the tragedy (i.e., from the very first phone call, before 6pm) "things happened at lightening pace." From the very start, MB and his support team were reacting to their changing and uncertain environment, rather than planning a response or following an established protocol as the various pieces of information came in and the tragedy unravelled piece by piece.

We just really rolled with whatever came ... for the next so many hours.

It all happened in a bit of a blur too - you don't know from where you're sitting as to how serious the situation is .... You are forming an opinion.... I didn't have time to debrief with my key leadership team or my Board as to what the situation was.

Another observation ... was that a lot of personal management training is training you to be proactive, visionary ... being two steps ahead, and that is good. But, I think there is also a point where you have to be positively reactive - you don't know what is coming at you, but you are simply having to take what's coming, and then say, What now? And I learnt... not to assume or presume anything, but simply whatever situation came to me, we then say okay, what's the PMI [Plus Minus Interesting model used for decision-making]? What's the positives, ... negatives, and what's the interesting part we have to look at?

[The PMI model of decision-making was codified by Edward de Bono in his book, "Serious creativity" (Pub. 1998).] While it is beyond the scope of the present study to investigate this model, in short the implications of making a particular decision are broken down into the Pluses, Minuses, and Interesting aspects, in order to broaden, organise and evaluate one's thoughts on the issue.)

Three staff briefings a day

Immediately following news of the tragedy, and in a climate of widespread grief involving a large number of people from within the school and from outside, practical issues required the attention and combined efforts and

decisions of a large group of people. MB was sensitive to the need for his staff to be kept informed and included in the immediate situation, and for colleagues to meet often and regularly in a supportive environment.

I met with the staff three times per day so that at all points they were fully informed as to what I was hearing, and what we were deciding as a school. I think you have got to keep people fully informed. … One of the simplest ways of bringing your staff together is to have good food and good coffee. (Seventeen local schools gave us morning tea over a period of about six months.) You could imagine the first morning tea, people coming together - there was just tears and grief, but they all came together - they just needed to come together. Over a period of three to four months, I saw the staff grow because of the coming-together.

RP from the Ministry of Education's TI response team has provided on-going support for the school from the night of the tragedy, and through the two years since that time.

I would always have Roger [RP] with me [in the early planning stages] and we would prepare things to share with the staff. So before that first assembly, staff went into the assembly knowing who had perished and what had happened that night. We met at lunch-time - we met at three in the afternoon [for the rest of the term]. And I think at all points they [the staff] knew what was going on.

ECC is a Christian school, and prayer was always part of the staff meetings, as it was part of assemblies with the students. The school is founded on the Christian faith which guides the school's operation and decision-making at all times, and prayer was an intrinsic aspect of the school's coping.

Commenting on the staff meetings, MB stated:
Over a period of three to four months, I saw the staff grow because of the coming-together. You've got to draw people together, and it's all about building around the core values of your culture. As a Christian school we are very used to praying together - to us that was important ... so I would always pray.

Initial responses to student and staff grief

The school provided ongoing assistance to children and staff at ECC through daily prayer and Christian messages. Following a traumatic event, many people who have a religious faith experience lower levels of stress and better mental health than people without a

faith (e.g., Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Laufer, Raz-Hamama, Levine, & Solomon, 2009). Tix and Frazier (1998) suggest that the social support within a religious community, and a sense of control that can be gained by trusting in God are pathways to religious coping in stressful situations.

Decisions for reflection, coping, and supporting were consistent with the Christian culture of the school. For instance, the school considered how they were going to handle the empty desks in classrooms in the days immediately following the tragedy.

We decided that we wouldn't be lighting a candle or drawing attention to ... an empty desk.... We established the chapel instead as a point of reflection ... where people could come. The guidance counsellor [wanted] pens and paper ... where people [could] come and write things and pin them up - any messages they want to do. They can put the flowers there too, and we had nice music playing, and we just opened that up daily from 7am til 11pm, and just allowed that to be a place where people could, and visitors could, come - absorb and give and pray and reflect. And there was no more structure to it than that, and it was lovely.

Staff and students were able to make their own decisions about seeking support from the available counsellors or from family and friends, and about visiting the chapel. This approach allowed for individual differences in responding to grief, and provided flexibility for individual expressions of grief.

I think we did make an unwritten expectation of ourselves that we wouldn't judge any kid as to how they were feeling or whatever. We would just simply provide them with an out where they could be with like-minded kids or people. The same with staff - they needed time out ... it doesn't matter. It's not for us to judge, but simply to help.

We assumed that most kids were going to be in some level of stress, and for whatever reason they were going to need to be together, or going to need to be at home, or it was going to fall apart in some way.

In respect of identifying any children who may have been particularly distressed, MB indicated that he trusted his staff, who were in closer contact with the children on a daily basis, to be alert to children who might need special care and support.

I think that I relied completely really on those who are closest to the students - my deans, my teachers, heads of departments, my guidance counselling team.

Otherwise, MB let students express natural grief responses, and provided a place, opportunity, and continuing support for students to respond in ways that could be helpful for them at that time.

Whenever students were filled with grief or need to be together, we would just actually roll with that. We wouldn't presume or assume anything, and so we had a lot of movement of groups of students for [the three days left in that school term] and the next term as they just found their feet within the whole thing as they processed things.

By allowing students some latitude between class-attendance and chapel-visits in the early stages, MB was acknowledging to students that what they were feeling was a natural response to grief, at the same time providing some reassurance and ongoing support for the students in the midst of their sadness in distressing or confusing times. However, MB also understood the benefits for students to resume a normal school routine as soon as reasonably possible.

Over time we gradually drew a boundary around what the kids could do, but we just let it find its own feet. There was nothing manufactured ... but we also knew those who were absolutely stricken with grief, and they were not coping at all, and were sick and so on. But, gradually we just drew the net in and started getting the school finding its feet again, and back into a routine. I don't think it's anything that you can force. ... We just met regularly to work out this whole thing.

If variation from the normal school programme is allowed to continue past a time deemed as reasonable in the circumstances, students could perceive the situation as one of continuing disruption (Ronan & Johnston, 2005). Also, a return to normal routine sends a message to students that the adults have the situation under control, so assisting students to have confidence in the staff to care for them. Thus, there are benefits for students to resume normal routines and school operation as soon as possible after a disaster or traumatic event.

A level head

Among personal characteristics understood to predict effective leadership is emotional stability (André, 2008). This does not mean that a leader cannot or should not feel an emotional reaction to a particular emotion-provoking situation; in fact, in certain situations, followers may well expect a leader to express or display

certain emotions, and a leader who fails to do so, may be perceived to lack sincerity or credibility (Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). Emotional stability refers to the characteristics of not being overly emotional, of not reacting strongly to all manner of stimuli, and of being able to stabilise emotionally after an arousing experience (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1996).

In order to perform effectively in a demanding situation, it is necessary to manage one's anxiety (Tarrant & Leathem, 2007). MB recognised the importance of remaining calm, and taking a steady, measured approach in a crisis situation, rather than becoming overwhelmed.

I think you respond according to the type of personality you are too - so I suppose it's going to be: I'm not a panicker. I'm not a panicker... and I don't get surprised easily or phased by things.

MB's reflective thinking and the aspect of his personality he describes as not being a "panicker," come together in his following comment:

I think you fall back on some of your own life wisdom at that point.... From 6 o'clock until I left here at 2.30 in the morning, I did probably more listening than speaking, and my decisions were made based on filtering what I heard. ... You have lots of offers of help and support [but]- no knee jerk reactions. I think it just needs to be measured. It needs to be thought about.

MB stresses that decisions are best made only after sufficient time has been taken to gather and assess available information into some sort of coherent picture and, importantly, where decisions have to be made in the absence of complete information, the most appropriate decisions were likely to be made if he remained calm.

MB also acknowledges that he was making decisions in the context of his overall learning from his life-experiences, which he described as "intuitive" responses, or responding from his "gut."

[In some instances, you're] going to ... respond intuitively from [your] gut.

Trust, relationships, and interactions with other people

MB emphasised the importance of managing relationships effectively, not only with people he knew, but with the many people he had never met before but who were involved in assisting the school at a time when important decisions had to be made.

You're ... surrounded with the enormity of emotion and the interplay of relationships and friendships and so on.

You're instantly thrust in ... you don't plan for a disaster, and you don't think about the amount of people-interaction [there] is.

Mutual confidence and trust between the principal and members of the school's Board of Trustees were critical for decision-making and cooperation in these difficult times.

As I've looked back on the operations of my Board of Trustees, I am of the firm opinion that primarily [the] best job that I can do with my Board is to build relationships of trust and of understanding. Therefore when situations like this come, I know who I can go to [and they know they can come to me]. I spend a lot of my time reporting to my Board with [how the school is doing] - I'm accountable to them. But in doing that I'm building a relationship.

MB refers to the need for effective interpersonal relationships in a range of situations that require considerable and ongoing communication and cooperation.

A lot of it [though] has been not around processes and guidelines and paper. It's really been about the fact that life is about relationship and people, and how it's very important to have those connections and relationships working really, really well - because that's what you fall back on.

If you have the people skills, then you can work with anyone really - Just setting up memorials you end up working with construction companies, you end up working with the police for investigations, you end up working with lawyers, the coroner's inquest - very, very difficult - but you build up knowledge as you go through - learning how they work and what they do.

Looking back: A need for concise crisis-documents

MB had not been trained in crisis leadership, and there were no concise, guiding-documents readily available to him on the night of the tragedy that could have guided him through a series of ordered steps. Nor was there a list of matters he should be attending to as a priority. There was no check-list of people he should or could contact immediately.

I literally didn't have time to find the right policy .... We do have policies on a range of things ... but I think it's
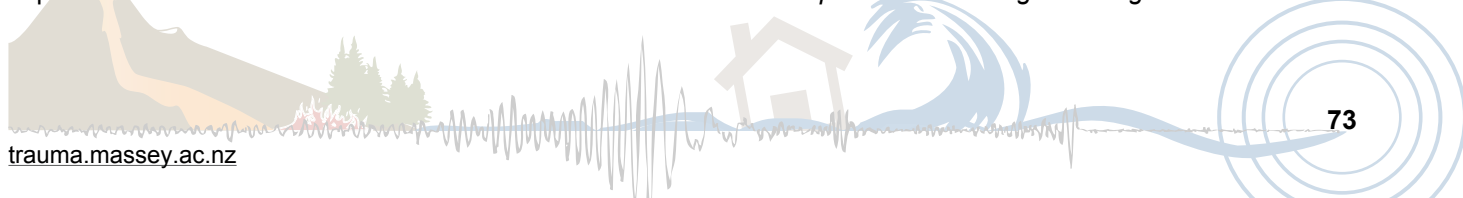
important to have "reach-for" policies, or "reach-for" documents.

It has to be a ... document that you have standing in your file there and you pull it out and it [says, do] A, B, C, D and E. I know it sounds a bit simplistic, but that's what you need.

Whatever ["reach-for" type of plan] is developed , ... they've got to tailor it to who they are and how they work in this situation, and I'll be the first to say that I can't just take my situation and drop it on someone else ... because it could be totally different next time.

I don't think ... it's always that you reach for the [phone] number because you don't know what to do, but you do want advice. And advice is coming at you from all over the place, and you do want people to suggest things that you haven't thought of.

It is noted here that the Ministry of Education does have an emergencies-document on its website: *Managing emergencies and traumatic incidents - The guide (Ministry of Education, 2010)*. This guide, available at the time of the tragedy, contains useful information for emergencies, but is 59 pages long, thus requiring more time for reading and deciding on a course of action than would typically be available in the early stages of a crisis. Thus, concise *reach-for* documents would have been helpful. It is noted that since the tragedy, in June 2009, the Ministry of Education has made available on its website an eight-step guide for "Responding to traumatic incidents." This briefer, seven-page guide contains some material that could be helpful in a crisis.

In relation to assistance available from the Ministry of Education website, the Ministry has a Traumatic Incident (TI) response 0800 telephone number (free in New Zealand) through which immediate assistance (across 24 hours) can be made available to schools needing help in a crisis. A local member of the Ministry's TI team, Roger Phillipson, was contacted on the night of the tragedy, and he has supported the school from that night and through the time since.

MB, the principal of ECC, led his school through a sudden, traumatic, and unique school event for which he had not been prepared. The present investigation advances understanding of school leadership in a human crisis, and suggests the following lessons and implications:

Lessons Learnt

- **There is a need for school principals to be trained in crisis leadership and management**

  It is important that school principals are prepared through having trained in crisis leadership and management, and that they have access to reach-for documents that provide direction, guidance, and personnel contacts, especially in the early phase of a crisis. I n relation to principals being trained and prepared to deal with a crisis, it is important that support staff, particularly senior staff, are educated in preparedness drills and practices prior to emergency situations.

- **There is a need for development of reach-for documents for New Zealand school principals**

  Based on findings of the present study, there is still a need for development of reach-for documents for school principals that are, by definition, concise and readily available to the principal immediately the crisis occurs. "Concise" documents would ideally be pamphlet-sized, with information shown in, for example, numbered steps, lists, or bullet-points, depending on the purpose of that document. Reach-for documents would include: guidelines for essential and recommended sequenced procedures in specific types of crisis event; a list of the pre-selected support team personnel with contact details, plus their expected roles and strengths; a list of the types of skills, knowledge, and advice that may be required from outside the immediate support team, with names and contact details alongside each identified skill or area of expertise; a list of groups who may be impacted by the crisis, and specified communication lines to those groups; and checklists for managing operational or routine matters not directly part of the crisis itself, but that may be impacted as a result of the crisis.

  It is important that the principal and all staff in the school: (1) are informed of the contents of the reach-for documents; (2) understand their own role in a particular crisis event; and (3) know where the crisis reach-for documents are located (in case the principal is off-campus at the time of a crisis). Clear reporting lines should be stated in all documents. All aspects of crisis preparation, including contact details for personnel, should be updated on a regular basis.

- **School staff would benefit from a knowledge of the grief process**

  School staff would likely benefit from some knowledge of the grief process. In the case of grieving students or staff, the school would be able to offer support to students and their families according to the families' wishes, and according to the culture of the school. Where appropriate, students could also receive messages about the natural grief process. The expression of grief, and rate of coping and adjustment is individually variable and it is important that the school does not assume or presume there should be a consistent pattern of response among the grieving.

- **School staff would benefit from training in how to support children exposed to traumatic events**

  Teachers would likely benefit from an understanding of how children of different age groups commonly reactions to traumatic events, and of how to provide the children with appropriate support.

- **A multi-skilled support team is required**

  A support team should be pre-selected for particular types of crisis events. Members of the support team would bring a range of relevant school, local, and expert knowledge and experience to the team. Likewise, specific types of assistance that may be required from outside the school should be anticipated, and appropriate personnel with contact details identified ahead of time.

- **Police procedures take time**

  There will inevitably be delays before the police can confirm and pass on information regarding injury or loss of life to the school and families. In certain type of crisis events, consideration may be given to requesting that a police officer is stationed at the school to provide support over a critical time period. Communication with, and assistance from, the police should be anticipated in a crisis, and consideration given to possible requirements the school may have of the police, as well as ways in which the school could assist the police in particular types of crisis event.

- **Work in partnership with the media**

  A co-operative partnership with the media is encouraged where the event is of public interest. The school can provide access for the media, with boundaries for school privacy where appropriate. Communication with the media should normally be only through a nominated person (or persons), usually the principal who ideally has had some media-training.

- **Reactive leadership may be the only option at times**

  In the early stage of a crisis, information is likely to be incomplete, with uncertainty, gaps, perhaps errors or ambiguity, and constraints on what a leader can do, or what he/she can say to the people impacted by the event. Thus, at various points in a crisis, a clear pathway ahead may not be immediately obvious, even though a decision may be required. It is important for leaders to remain calm, listen to alternative viewpoints, and to avoid "knee-jerk" reactions as they make decisions in this phase of the event.

- **Keep staff informed**

  The principal should keep staff informed of current crisis matters affecting the school. Regular staff meetings, more than once a day in the initial phase, should be scheduled for information-updating and social support.

- **The culture of the school is important**

  It is important to consider the culture of the school when considering a school's needs during a crisis, and in a grief-context. Intrinsic values and beliefs of the school community will underpin decisions and approaches taken in dealing with the crisis; as well, cultural and individual differences within the school should be recognised and respected.

- **A steady, measured approach from a leader can encourage a calming environment for the support team**

  Even in a confusing and demanding context, a leader can assert some control over the situation through focussing on the task at hand, modelling a steady approach him/herself, and assisting team members to gather and assess information as far as practicable before taking necessary decisions.

- **Effective interpersonal relationships are critical for effective team operation**

  In a wisely chosen support team, there will be effective interpersonal relationships where there is mutual trust, respect, and effective communication between the principal and the team. To enable prudent decision-making in a crisis, a leader will encourage his/her support team to bring relevant perspectives to the
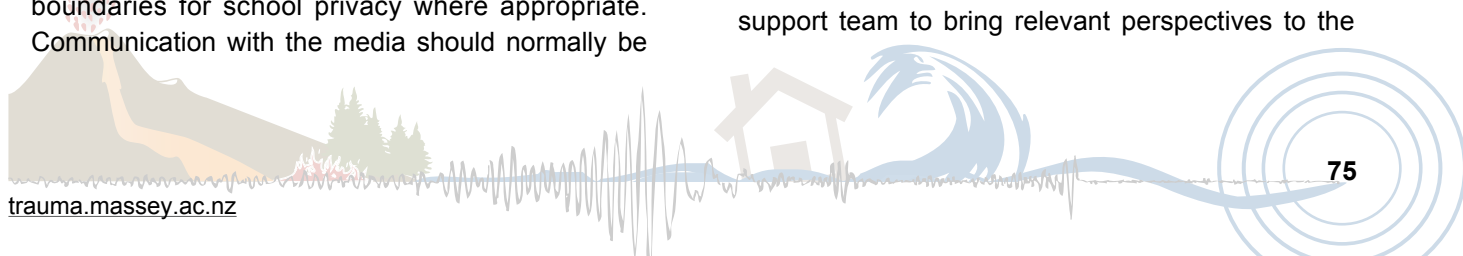
situation, and at times will entrust team members to attend to certain matters on his/her behalf.

Part 1 has investigated aspects of leadership in, essentially, the first week of the tragedy as events unfolded and as the school was coping with individual responses to the tragedy and managing operational aspects of the event. There is a long aftermath to a tragedy: see Part 2 for an investigation of the principal's leadership through the following two years.

Acknowledgements

References

André, R. (2008). *Organisational behavior*. New Jersey, USA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.

Connelly, M. S., Gilbert, J. A., Zaccaro, S. J., Threlfall, K. V. Marks, M. A., & Mumford, M. D. (2000). Exploring the relationship of leadership skills and knowlde to leader performance. *Leadership Quarterly, 11* (1), 65-86.

Eysenck, H. J. & Eysenck, S. B. G. (1996). Manual of Eysenck Personality Scales (EPS Adult). London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Fein, A. H. & Isaacson, N. S. (2009). Echoes of Columbine. The emotion work of leaders in school shooting sites. *American Behavioral Scientist, 52*(9), 1327-1346.

Gardner, W. L., Fischer, D., & Hunt, J. G. (2009). Emotional labor and leadership: A threat to authenticity. *The Leadership Quarterly, 20* (3), 466-482.

Hutchinson, S., Valentino, K. E., & Kirkner, S. L. (1998). What works for the gander does not work as well for the goose: The effects of leader behaviour. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 28*(2), p. 171-182.

Klein, C., DiazGranados, D., Salas, E., Huy, L., Burke, R., Lyons, R & Goodwin, G. (2009). Does team building work? *Small Group Research, 40*, 181-222.

Koenig, H. G., McCulloch, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of religion and health*. New York: Oxford University Press, US.

Laufer, A., Raz-Hamma, Y., Levine, S. Z., & Solomon, Z. (2009). Posttraumatic growth in adolescence: The role of religiosity, distress, and forgiveness. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 28*(7), 862-880.

McKenna, B., Rooney, D., & Boal, K. B. (2009). Wisdom principles as a meta-theoretical basis for evaluating leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 20*(2), 177-190.

Ministry of Education (2010). Managing emergencies and traumatic incidents: The guide. Retrieved 24 May 2010 from: http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~/media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/PrimarySecondary/EmergencyManagement/TheGuideSm.pdf

Mumford, M. D., Friedrich, T. L., Caughron, J. J., & Byrne, C. L. (2007). Leader cognition in real-world settings: How do leaders think about crises? The *Leadership Quarterly, 18*, 515-543.

Ronan, K. R. & Johnston, D. M. (2005). *Promoting community resilience in disasters: The role for schools, youth, and families*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media, Inc.

Tabernero, C., Chambel, M. J. & Curral, L., & Arana, J. M. (2009). The role of task-oriented versus relationship-oriented leadership on normative contract and group performance. *Social Behaviour and Personality, 37*(10), 1391-1404.

Tarrant, R. A. & Leathem , J. M. (2007). A CBT-Based Therapy for Music Performance Anxiety. In D. Einstein (Ed.). *Innovations and Advances in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, Einstein, D (Ed.). Sydney: Australian Academic Press.

Tix, A. P. & Frazier, P. A. (1998). The use of religious coping during stressful life events: Main effects, moderation and mediation. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 66*(2), 411-422.

Voltz, K. G. & von Cramon (2006). What neuroscience can tell about intuitive processes in the context of perceptual discovery. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience 18* (12), 2007-2087.