"What if we don't get it right?": Leading Schools When the World Shuts Down

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders searched for new techniques and strategies to help them lead their school communities. This phenomenological research study involved interviews with 17 principals from elementary, middle, and high schools in the southeastern United States who served as principals during the school years between 2019 and 2022. This research was guided by two central questions: (1) How did K-12 school principals effectively lead and adapt their leadership style and actions to meet the extreme challenges incurred during a crisis? and (2) How can educational leadership programs better prepare school leaders to lead during times of crisis? These leaders shared their struggles and fears and discussed how they adjusted to the situation and cared for their students, staff, and parents. Three emerging themes were evident from the interviews: (1) the numerous challenges faced during the crisis, (2) techniques and strategies used to navigate the challenges, and (3) leadership growth and learning. These themes were studied through the theoretical lens of adaptive leadership. Findings indicate that many of the successful strategies these principals used align with the adaptive leadership model. Leader preparation programs and others who develop school leaders must prepare leaders for the next crisis. Intentional consideration of the adaptive leadership model in leadership preparation programming could help leaders better understand how to guide their school communities during intense times of change and uncertainty.

Keywords: adaptive leadership**,** crisis, K-12 schools, principal preparation programs

Recently, K-12 school principals have experienced increased demands, public dissatisfaction, and politically driven agendas. The 2019-20 school year, however, brought a new level of challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic; national unrest due to racial tensions; and a politically divided local, state, and national environment. As schools alternated between traditional school settings, virtual classes, and hybrid classes in this uncertain environment, K-12 principals adjusted and readjusted their support and leadership to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Amid uncertainty, principals had to act intentionally and often outside of their comfort zones.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to learn how K-12 school principals led their school communities and adjusted their leadership styles and actions to meet the extreme challenges incurred during a time of compounded national and global crises. Exploring how one group of principals led others and adapted to changes and challenges could inform further development of educational leadership programs, especially in terms of preparing future and current school leaders to better mitigate and lead through complex, compounded crises via the application of adaptive leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Many leadership and crisis management theories could be applied in these difficult times. On one hand, distributive leadership allows members of an organization to anticipate and react to challenges (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008), while transformational leaders establish norms that adjust and change as the organization shifts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). On the other hand, situational leaders modify their behaviors depending on the circumstances, environment, and development level of their people (Gates, et al., 1976). Given that each of these theories includes a level of adaptation, however, we chose to use the lens of adaptive leadership to view principals' experiences during a crisis as they led their schools through uncertainty and confusion.

The origins of adaptive leadership are found in Heifetz' (1994) work where he described this type of leadership as occurring when any person, including those without formal leadership responsibilities, is able to guide others to adapt in challenging or changing times. Challenges, in this instance, specifically speak to any time when an adaptation or change is introduced and is internalized personally by the people involved, meaning they question themselves and their circumstances. Such challenges involve loss of some kind, whether it be temporary or permanent loss. Heifetz (1994) viewed an adaptive challenge as one that the current behavior, processes, and tools cannot meet, and Heifetz and Linsky (2017) referred to problems that cannot be solved through expert knowledge or authority as adaptive challenges. With this in mind, we can see that the challenges in schools during the period under review here were adaptive challenges. Indeed, principals did not have a playbook to follow and were unsure of what was to come as they made decisions during this period.

In terms of the work of the adaptive leader, they help others face the difficult reality they are confronting and adapt quickly and with confidence (Northouse, 2022; Kaiser, 2020). Indeed, Heifetz (1994) stated, "Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face" (p. 22). Thus, adaptive leadership involves mobilizing people to tackle complex challenges while allowing the organization and people to thrive. This mobilization sometimes includes changing organizational values and strategies (Heifetz et al., 2009). The adaptive leader, therefore, faces reality and helps others to learn and take action. The adaptive leader empowers others to apply new knowledge and create an enduring foundation valued by the organization (Naqshbandi & Tabche, 2018).

When an unusual situation or crisis occurs, adaptive leadership is critical, and specific skills and traits have been associated with adaptive leaders. For instance, adaptive leaders should be flexible in their thinking and astute in scanning the environment and assessing needs. Additionally, an openness to learning and the ability to embrace new ideas is essential for leaders who need to adapt to unique circumstances or situations (Chughtai et al., 2023; London, 2022; Lovett et al., 2023; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). After all, a leader's behaviors during a crisis affect members' attitudes and the performance of the organization (Teo et al., 2017). Yukl & Mahsud (2010) posited that improving skills such as cognitive complexity, social/emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and situational awareness increased the effectiveness of the adaptive leader. The concept of adaptive leadership incorporates four perspectives that when considered together can characterize the adaptive leader:

1. Systems-Adaptive leaders view problems as complex, complicated, and connected to other issues, all of which can evolve and change constantly.
2. Biological-Adaptive leaders understand that people evolve due to internal and external changes and encourage others to succeed in new circumstances.
3. Service Orientation-Adaptive leaders use their experience and knowledge to serve others by helping them understand the problem and find solutions.
4. Psychotherapeutic-Adaptive leaders understand that people need a supportive environment. They know that people can adapt more readily when they face challenges directly and learn new behaviors and attitudes (Heifetz, 1994; Northouse, 2022).

For the purposes of this study, we utilized these four lenses as a foundation for examining the principals' approaches as adaptive leaders responding via crisis management.

From a systems perspective, Dunn (2020) discussed how adaptive leadership is able to succeed in complex, unpredictable circumstances. He acknowledged that even prior to the pandemic, educational leaders were working in unpredictable and complex environments that were constantly facing external and internal challenges. Adaptive leaders encourage a culture of learning and sharing of information (Chughtai et al., 2023). These leaders help others find solutions to difficult problems. There is also a need for a psychotherapeutic approach in the form of empathy and attention to a team's well-being during a crisis (Goniewicz and Hertelendy, 2023).

Epperly, et al. (2022) argued that the use of adaptive strategies during a crisis is typically more successful as most crisis leadership strategies do not address the complexities involved. They contend that leaders must consider the concept of paracrisis and continue to learn from the ways in which their organization adapts successfully or fails to adapt when threats occur. Hess and Lowry (2020) argued that leaders should be bricoleurs who draw upon different resources and strategies to meet the changing needs of their organization. Whether we view crisis management from a paracrisis standpoint or as a bricoleur, it is important in crises that leaders are able to adapt and to encourage their team to do the same. Adaptative leadership models, however, necessitate that leaders expect the unexpected, so to speak, and exploring leaders' actions and how they adapted during a crisis in relation to the four adaptive perspectives noted above may help principal preparation providers coach future and current school administrators for the next crisis.

Methodology

The study included 17 K-12 school leaders who were school principals during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years in one suburban school district in the southeastern United States. Eleven elementary school principals, four middle school principals, and two high school principals were interviewed during the spring of 2022 in a virtual setting. This study's focus was on the challenges these principals faced while leading schools during a worldwide pandemic, racial tensions and unrest, and a politically divided nation. The research questions at the center of this phenomenological study included the following:
- How do K-12 school principals effectively lead and adapt their leadership style and actions to meet the extreme challenges incurred during a crisis?
- How can educational leadership programs better prepare school leaders to lead during times of crisis?

Principals were interviewed via an online platform, in a format that ensured "privacy, safety, trust, and rapport" (Sohn et.al., 2017, p.132). Structured questions were addressed, but principals could expand beyond the questioning when they had more information to share. This openness is crucial and seeks to keep "the interview process as close to the lived experience as possible" (Laverty, 2003, p. 19). Interviews were transcribed directly with names of people, places, and other identifying information removed. As respondents used terminology that might be unfamiliar to all the researchers, definitions were provided.

A phenomenological case study approach was used as it allowed participants to impart shared and individual lived experiences during a window of time (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverty, 2003). Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology was applied as it recognizes the researcher's experience/background in the conversation (Laverty, 2003). Moreover, a phenomenological approach allows the "researcher to keep an open mind and listen in a receptive manner to the participants' descriptions" (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 252).

The researchers underwent four cycles of reviewing the transcripts beginning with the use of inductive coding with interviews divided equally among the three researchers (Saldaña, 2021). Initial codes included the following: Communication, Normalcy, Relationships/Trust,

Leadership/Humanity, Collaboration, Socio-Emotional Skills and Academics, Mental Health and Wellness, Navigating the Unknown, Navigating Diverse Perspectives, and Intentionality and Growth. To increase the dependability of the data, the researchers repeated the process on a second set of interviews resulting in areas of agreement on which codes should be utilized and which were redundant. The third cycle involved identifying key quotes in each of the transcripts that spoke to the code. Finally, using elaborative coding (Saldaña, 2021), the researchers collectively developed "clusters of meaning" (Creswell,2007, p. 61), evolving into the following three themes: (1) challenges faced during the COVID crisis, (2) tools and techniques for navigating challenges, and (3) leadership growth and learning during the COVID crisis.

Findings

Challenges Faced During the COVID Crisis

First, it is important to identify common challenges faced by principals during the Pandemic. Initially, principals were balancing multiple "plates" while trying to keep things as normal as possible. For example, one principal was opening a new school in the fall of 2020 and knew how difficult it would be for parents to leave their children at a new school that they had never visited. She discussed how they tried to replicate open house and school tours virtually. Another principal talked about how she tried to recreate her lunch with students' reward activity called Lunch Bunch. Instead of eating together in the lunchroom, she held an online lunch bunch through scheduled Microsoft Teams meetings with students. And yet another principal videoed her Morning News announcements from her backyard to show students that everything was okay and that she was working from home just like they were. Principals discussed how in the online faculty meetings they would share their life at home with their staff. Eventually, however, many of the principals realized they would not be returning to "normal." One principal even expressed her frustration with others talking about going back to normal, as seen in the following quotation:

> I am so sick of hearing 'when we get back to normal.' ...This is normal. Now, it's just a different normal, but there is no going back to normal as if what we've done the last two years has been a waste or ineffective and it has not been.

Thus, principals went from trying to maintain a sense of normalcy for themselves, their staff, and their students and parents to recognizing that perhaps "normalcy" as it previously existed was not something for which they needed to strive. As leaders, they went from a push to keep things the same to a realization that perhaps change was needed. As another challenge, the leaders of these schools shared how they had to "navigate the unknown" as the pandemic spread. The principals were leaders who were used to being proactive and could usually predict student, staff, and parent needs accurately. Planning ahead, though, became much more difficult during the pandemic, as seen through this principal's response:

> I think it keeps going back to the unknown. You would make these plans and you communicate out what you're going to do because it's based on what you knew at that time. And then 30 minutes later you get information that says differently from what you just said, and so it was just this constant revolving door of trying to communicate, communicate, communicate. But things just kept changing so fast.

Principals discussed how difficult it was for teachers who had to quickly shift to online instruction without all the needed resources and skills. Indeed, teams had to find and distribute technology to students, and teachers, at times, had to be able to switch from in-person instruction to online instruction and back to in-person quickly. Some teachers were teaching online and in-person classes simultaneously. Principals had to plan and facilitate professional learning for online instruction while the online instruction was already taking place. And then there was also the challenge of helping students and parents adjust to online learning. To help her staff navigate the unknown, one principal shared an analogy with her staff where she equated the situation to being in a boat on the ocean. She told them they were just going to row their boat through the storm and talked with them about choosing their oar and just rowing or riding the waves. This caught on among her staff, who referred to it throughout the year.

Principals also shared how they had to navigate and lead communities with diverse perspectives during the crisis. Communities across the country were divided politically over mask-wearing and other divisive issues, and these schools were no different. Several principals indicated that they were dealing with more parents who were in distress or angry over political issues. Parents began reacting negatively to Social Emotional Learning which had been a visible focus in the schools for several years, and some schools suddenly had parents wanting to ban books. One principal described it as people having "less bandwidth." In some instances, teachers felt that they went from being heroes at the onset in the spring of 2020 to villains as the pandemic continued and political tensions were high. Staff members also had diverse perspectives on political issues, and principals had to learn to navigate both parents and staff, as seen in the following analogy that one participant relayed to her staff:

> Our job is to stand on the 50-yard line, and we are going to support people that are in the left end zone and those that are in the right end zone, and people that are strewn along all of the yardage in between. Each child and staff member has a different story, and we need to respect the story. You can learn the story to respect the story, or you cannot know the story and still respect the person.

As leaders, they had to learn to bridge the differences between staff, parents, guardians, students, and community members.

Almost all the principals discussed mental health concerns. From the pandemic's start, principals were concerned about their staff, as many expressed concerns over the stress teachers had to endure. One principal talked about how she had to step out of her comfort zone in online staff meetings to help her staff accept the harsh realities of their situations (Heifetz, 1994) and see that "this is what it is, and we're just going to move on." Using quotations from a famous comedian, she motivated her staff to see that we all have bad days and they would persevere. Considering both the pandemic and the political situation, one principal discussed how different people needed different types of support. She said her administrative team was trying to meet the varying needs of students, staff, and parents and it was taking its toll on the team. Parents needed support with how to help their children learn at home and in dealing with the fear of illness when they initially reopened schools; teachers needed help with adjusting to a new way of teaching and a new way of viewing expectations; and students needed reassurance and emotional support as well as academic support and resources.

Many expressed increased challenges with students when they returned to in-person instruction and a rise in student crisis meetings due to mental health issues. A high school

principal discussed how they would learn of a student's mental health issues through social media posts or friends. Their counselors were seen as having to double their efforts. Although difficult to navigate, some practices that began during the pandemic, such as trauma-informed practices, continue to benefit students today, as seen in the following participant quotation:

> We are so focused on being trauma-informed now, and a lot of the things that we put in place because of COVID we've kept because they are good trauma-informed practices like, you know, we don't have 300 kids all at their lockers in the hallway anymore. So some of the things we did because of COVID also helped us with our trauma-informed practices. So that really helped us. Now the staff is becoming more knowledgeable about, you know, what trauma does to the brain and how kids can be impacted and how to de-escalate situations instead of escalating them.

Additionally, there was a renewed focus on the whole-child approach to learning as students struggled when returning to school. This is reflected in the following principal's comments:

> Now if you take the last two years, these kids that are coming back in, we're starting to see the social, emotional issues that they don't know how to carry on conversations, they don't know how to follow a schedule. They don't know how to get along. They don't know how to do school, and the self-awareness pieces are not there from the social, emotional learning standpoint.

While they struggled to support students in their return to in-person learning, schools became more focused and intentional with social and emotional learning, and principals indicated that they felt they were doing a better job in this area.

As another challenge, school administrators and teachers discussed addressing the gaps in learning and inequities that became evident during the pandemic. Schools went virtual in March 2020, and while schools reopened the following fall, many families chose to keep their children at home. Among those who returned in August, they experienced breaks in their education as they were quarantined sometimes multiple times, resulting in a lack of continuity and consistency. Additionally, some students had inadequate internet, and many did not have devices to use. Some schools loaned mobile internet connections and digital tablets to families who needed them. Many schools were also preparing meals for families in need. As one principal shared, these inequities impacted students' learning, as seen in the following quotation:

> So there were all these inequities that were exposed that we just had to figure out. How are we going to mitigate these as best we can and help these kids learn? Because at the end of the day, that's what we were trying to get to, but also realizing that there was so much more support needed outside of just the academics.

In addition to inequities, middle and high school principals observed that many students stopped submitting work altogether. When students returned to the classroom, teachers had to prioritize standards and focus on the most important concepts. Some teachers came to understand that students could still learn without the extra practice work previously required. An example of this realization can be seen in a story one principal shared about a student who, previously, was an advanced student who always turned in all her work and received good grades. When she returned to school, she experienced a mental health crisis and missed many days of school, resulting in her inability to finish 8th grade and move to high school. Teachers, however, realized that they could excuse some of the practice work and only test her on the most necessary concepts. As a result, she passed 8th grade and was thriving in high school the following year.

Tools and Techniques for Navigating Challenges

During this crisis, principals faced unanticipated challenges, never having been through a pandemic before, and part of the difficulty in this included finding ways to cope with running schools in online and face-to-face capacities; ensuring faculty, students, and families had mental health supports and structures in place for overall wellbeing; navigating the ensuing political, social, and economic crises that seemed to accompany this pandemic; and trying to ensure that students were learning throughout the crisis. They truly were navigating the unknown. As one principal stated, "And so it was like, my biggest fear was, 'What if we don't get it right?'" And another worried, "I don't know how to do this from afar." Whether they recognized it during the actual pandemic, however, they utilized a specific set of tools to navigate these challenges. In fact, the most prominent code found during the analysis centered on the importance of "communication." Another significant code was "collaboration," and together, communication and collaboration led to "relationships/trust" as a final significant code. These three elements resulted in the principals' success in navigating this new and unanticipated world.

In terms of communication, most principals would agree that this is an important part of leadership in the best of times; however, the type and level of communication required during the pandemic was different than before and did not always come naturally. As principals noted, the pandemic required a new level of communication with all stakeholders—staff, students, and families-and it also necessitated a level of vulnerability on each principal's behalf. As one principal noted, the difficulty of communication during this time was "being as honest and as transparent as I possibly could be with where we were … You're being as honest as you can. You're admitting that you don't have all the answers." Communication needed to take multiple forms and be frequent. Of course, schools were virtual during this time and communication was therefore virtual as well, but principals recognized that email communication was not the best mode. As one principal stated, "emails lead to distrust and we don't want to go down that path either. And so I felt like if we take the time to call, that we're connecting with our families … You're talking over 1000 phone calls within a month period." And yet another stated, "there's so many changes coming so fast. And you know the absence of information is a dangerous thing because then people start kind of telling themselves their own story." Principals felt the need to establish that "constant communication space," and while many thought that they "over communicated," this was vital to ensure "that we were supporting our teachers and supporting our families with all the knowledge that we had because everybody was so scared."

Additionally, principals had to think carefully about exactly what was communicated and how the messages were constructed and shared throughout this time. As one principal stated, "so just having that understanding of, you know, how you communicate with people isn't just your intent of communication, it's how your communication is received." With the pandemic, families, students, and teachers were scared, and, thus, it was vital to have "proactive, consistent clear messaging to our families and staff." Almost all of the participants interviewed discussed how teachers did not know how to support students during this time, families did not know how to support their children during this time, and everyone was learning together. As previously noted, there were families with kindergartners who had never stepped into the school, there were students who were not eating at home or did not have access to technology, and there were individuals suffering with mental and physical health concerns. Additionally, political and

social issues took center stage and certain voices were looming louder than others. Regarding navigating political and social issues, one principal stated the following:

> We're going to have to demystify what's happening here. Come, here's the agenda. If you have issues that you feel need to be raised, please add to it so that we can truly have a dialogue and a conversation.

The key was to create spaces where those voices could be heard and dialogue could occur; otherwise, miscommunication and divisiveness would take over. Through an intense focus on communication, though, leaders learned to communicate in ways that were truly engaging and resulted in meaningful dialogue rather than mere information sharing.

Indeed, in many cases, leaders noted that enhanced communication led to stronger collaborative efforts with families, staff, and other leaders. Overall, there was a message of "togetherness." As one principal stated, they kept reinforcing the message, "we're going to get through it because we're together." In terms of leadership, collaborative efforts amongst principals changed the way that many viewed their positions, as seen in the following quotation:

> I ended up collaborating a whole lot more with other principals. When you're in the principalship, it's very easy to be siloed in because you are just focused on your school, but I spent more time asking other principals, "OK, how are you doing this?" Not necessarily to copy them, but sometimes just to reinforce that I was on the right track. And then they would also contact me and be like, "how are you handling that?" So we spent more time aligning ourselves and we actually found out that by being aligned with our approach, it created a better message.

In many ways, the idea of the principalship moved from being a very individualized role to one that required a network of support. Another agreed stating, "having that critical network of other leaders, whether it's, you know, you're sitting in an AP role or you're sitting in a principal's role, or you're sitting in a district level role and you've got to have those people around you … and you need to be able to listen to them." And another agreed, "it created a space as a leader where I was able to collaborate so much more than we ever had before." This level of administrative support was critical to their survival as leaders during this time.

In addition to collaboration amongst their leader colleagues, principals created a sense of collaboration amongst the teachers and staff in their schools. Just as with the principals, teachers were scared—they, too, were not prepared with the tools needed to succeed during a pandemic. What they needed above all else, though, was each other. Throughout the pandemic, teachers "shared how much their collaborative teams had meant to them, even just those times where they're really over-planning. And it wasn't even just back in the spring when they were home. They just wanted to talk to somebody, you know?" And once principals developed these spaces for teachers, "we had a real sense of collective efficacy there for a minute that I don't know that we've ever had before." Another agreed, stating, "We all work together and we just wanted people who had our vision for the school and wanted to work for the kids. And we just kind of kept that, just repeating that mantra of we're here for the students." Principals quickly recognized the importance of these collaborative spaces not only for planning but for survival.

Both collaboration and communication emphasize the significance of building and nurturing relationships and trust during this time. As one principal admitted, "I think what got us through that and now this is what everybody kind of says is the relationship piece." After all, "schools are not places that should feel impersonal," but this was highlighted even more during

the pandemic, and principals noted that they had to intentionally work to emphasize connections and relationships among their teachers and students during this time so that everyone felt supported. This included Zoom meetings where principals checked on teachers and asked about their lives, but it also included instances where they shared more about their personal lives in a concerted effort to humanize themselves, make themselves more vulnerable, and connect on a deeper level. In one case, it even included a virtual cocktail hour. Regardless of the focus or set up, regular meetings for team building were vital. As one participant said, "We started having an everyday town hall meeting. That's what I called faculty meetings, and it was something we had already started monthly with our initiative. But it was amazing how it brought us together as a faculty, just having 15 minutes with each other every day."

Similarly, leadership worked to connect with parents, especially those who may have been parents of kindergarteners, sixth graders, ninth graders, or any of those grades where students were entering a new schooling environment (elementary, middle, or high) for the first time. For example, parents of kindergarteners, as noted, had never visited the schools—they did not know what the car rider line looked like, what happened at lunch, or what the halls of the school looked like. This took specialized care from principals to ensure parents and guardians that their children would be supported, as indicated in the following quotation:

So, dealing with that anxiety and saying I know you can't come in the building, but the availability of meeting with me, we'll meet this way. We'll meet virtually. I'll show you my office. I'll talk to you about my kids. Like we'll find ways to connect. And That bridge, that gap. So that when we can meet in person we are able to build upon the relationship we already have. You know, parents who are upset if we don't have a relationship to begin with, it's a very challenging for me to work alongside you. You may not be willing to partner with me because you have no idea who I am. You have no idea what I stand for. You have no idea what our school is about because you've never been in here.

Several participants mentioned creating these bonds with parents and guardians whom they had never met, and there was a critical need to find different ways in which to build trust.

Leaders also recognized the importance of placing an emphasis on building and rebuilding trust with marginalized and underrepresented groups. As stated above, political, social, and economic issues were heightening during this time, and many students and families were experiencing the ramifications not only of COVID but also of disenfranchisement and oppression based on race and class. This can be seen in the following participant quotation:

… there were groups of kids that were hurting and, you know, they just, they just, you know, for whatever reason felt wronged and this, that, and the other. So it was every conversation, every day, every week. And it was just, you know, you just had to win every interaction and every interaction had to be a winning interaction to try and build that trust back. And so that took a long time. And I feel like we're starting to emerge from some of that. But some of our groups still feel somewhat disenfranchised.

Whether it came down to wearing masks, including books with supposedly "divisive concepts," or other issues, principals had a responsibility to ensure that those voices who had been previously silenced had room to emerge and be heard. Moreso than before, there was a divide between individuals that had to be navigated carefully by leaders.

Lastly, in terms of relationships, principals quickly recognized that they needed to collaborate with one another to plan for their schools and support teachers, students, and families. Beyond mere collaboration, though, they realized the significance of stronger relationships amongst their colleagues. As one principal stated, "You know, it's find your tribe, like, find that group of principals you can collaborate with." This was especially key for newer principals with whom we talked—for those who were early on in their careers, such relationships were vital to their growth and survival in leadership during this time.

Leadership Growth and Learning During the COVID Crisis

Creating spaces for intentionality and growth was a theme that emerged throughout all the responses, as participants focused on their own personal growth and the growth of others, including future leaders. Successful leaders are reflective leaders, and these leaders utilized this interview process to deeply reflect on their experience. Many spoke of the need to be vulnerable and transparent, along with a healthy dose of self-awareness. Knowing their core values and mission enabled the leader in making decisions that meet the needs of students. One interviewee stated this clearly in the following quotation:

> One, is you have to really know who you are at your core. You've got to know kind of your guiding principles, your beliefs and that is what's going to get you through difficult things like you know how you make decisions, why you make decisions because you're going to have a bazilian decisions that you never knew.

Another tied self-awareness to mental well-being stating, "if you're not there as the leader, if you don't get yourself through the grief process You cannot guide other people through it." A sense of self and vulnerability were key factors in these principals' leadership during the pandemic.

With any leadership position, the presupposition is that because of the position, the leader has all the answers, as stated here:

> When anytime people come to you with a dilemma, all the heads just turn. It's like you're supposed to have all the problem's right answers and you really don't have and you've got to work through that. But the weight that you carry is absolutely exhausting and making sure you understand how to balance.

Leaders acknowledged, relying on their core values, that they did not have all the answers, but they made it a goal to create that space where staff feels they could come to them for guidance and support. Having mentors was key for each of the respondents, with some having regular principal gatherings and others seeking more diverse input, as seen in the following quotation:

> So that vulnerability space of being able to say, you know, have your go-to, find your go-to people whether that be your mentor that is assigned to you, do not be afraid to tell them. I don't know what I'm doing or I need help here. What would you do in this situation?

It was through this collaboration that leaders were able to balance the burden of leadership during the pandemic, express vulnerability, and collaborate and distribute the work.

Leaders came to understand the importance of knowing all facets of their building and recognizing that this is a "relationship business." Certainly, there is a need to understand the operations side of the building, but "really understanding the perspective and the purview of everybody in the building and how if even one piece goes away, you can't function or function as

well" was fundamental to continued growth. This was especially daunting for the principal who was opening a school when the pandemic occurred, because those operational and relational components had not been established.

When asked what they would share with future leaders, the focus was on understanding the change process and a realization that there will always be challenges:

> … yes, the pandemic was hard. But I mean, you remember when you were in that role, you're going to have the death of a student. Um, the work, even in a good year, the work is hard and draining, and when you have to make hard decisions and people don't understand, I mean, you know. Somebody is always upset about something. It's not an easy job.

These principals reiterated the need to engage in transparent communication and be thoughtful and deliberative as "most things are not emergencies." Clearly these respondents, while acknowledging the difficulty of navigating through this time, modeled self-awareness and vulnerability and recognized the value in creating spaces for intentionality and growth.

Discussion

Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership theory was posited with respect to the evolution of society or an organization as it goes through inevitable changes, including crisis management. We see its benefit in understanding how these principals came to adapt and help others adapt during this compounded and complex crisis. Adaptive leadership takes a process approach (Northouse, 2022), and understanding the complexities of the situation and interaction of the players, the leader observes, interprets, and intervenes to successfully lead the organization through adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Applying the theory of adaptive leadership proposed by Heifetz (1994) and further explained by Northouse (2022) to the findings in this study, we see a connection. Indeed, adaptive leadership incorporates four perspectives: systems, biological, service orientation, and psychotherapeutic, as noted earlier. Communication, collaboration, and relationship/trust building emerged as overarching skills the principals used to adapt during this crisis. From a systems perspective, communication was altered and increased immensely in the complex environment as principals sought to comprehend and interpret the daily changes the pandemic brought about, along with addressing the politically divisive environment. The importance of building relationships and trust among stakeholders can be viewed through biological and psychotherapeutic biases. It was vital for principals to support others in understanding that they could adapt and thrive in this new environment. Many stressed to their teachers that it was all right to try new solutions even if they made mistakes. The principals did not temper the situation, but, rather, they helped stakeholders face the harsh reality of the situation and supported them through it. They also understood that they were tasked with caring for their students, staff, and parents. According to Heifetz (1994), service orientation involves having a practical and prescriptive view of the situation. The principals looked for ways to use their skills and knowledge to help others but also found that they had to analyze the situation and look for new solutions and different ways of leading.

The following are six leadership behaviors pivotal to adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2022) to which the principals' actions are aligned:

1. Get on the Balcony – Principals had to step back and look at the entire picture and how each group (students, staff, and parents) was affected by the multiple challenges.
2. Identify the Adaptive Challenge – Principals indicated that they had to identify different challenges that arose daily, or hourly as one principal described the situation. They had to consider cultural norms that were in place, such as grading practices and work completion requirements, while they worked with staff to adapt.
3. Regulate Distress – All principals discussed their efforts to calm those around them and encourage and motivate them to persevere.
4. Maintain Disciplined Attention - Principals constantly monitored several challenges, focusing on what was best for students.
5. Give the Work Back to the People – While the principals provided direction, many spoke of collaborating with their teachers, support staff, counselors, and parents. Several realized that different groups needed different levels of direction and guidance.
6. Protect Leadership Voices from Below – Principals described how they sought input from all groups. Some called on parents to see if they were getting the support they needed. Principals shared how they had to listen to all sides of the divisive political views and maintain neutrality while continuing to do what was best for students.

The leadership tools most prominently explored and implemented by principals in this study were communication, collaboration, and relationship/trust building, which can be seen across the spectrum of adaptive leadership approaches.

Research Study Implications

Principal Preparation Programs (PPP) certainly cover multiple types of leadership, but we posit that adaptive leadership may need to be incorporated more fully, especially when it comes to leading during crises. As Epperly et al. (2022) noted, current crisis management models do not necessarily meet our needs. We posit, however, that stronger leadership foundations are needed, before we can expand on crisis management models for school leaders. For the leaders in this study, they learned to continually adapt, and enable their staff and community to adapt, to situations happening on a daily, or sometimes hourly, basis. While experts at communication, the forms of sharing information changed drastically and quickly. They quickly recognized the need to continually find ways to demystify new information and at times misinformation. They realized the importance of adapting to leading over video conferencing systems and creating mechanisms to reach those who did not have access to certain platforms. These leaders found they needed to collaborate more frequently and be vulnerable and honest in their interactions. They recognized the value in creating spaces where faculty, parents, and most importantly, students, felt safe and had the tools necessary for learning, and for physical and mental health. In short, these leaders realized that they needed to think differently. While no PPP can fully prepare a leader for every challenge they may face, they can certainly provide real-life scenarios where the candidate should demonstrate adaptability.

Adaptability certainly took center stage in dealing with issues of mental health, their own and others, and with the rise in distrust over masks and curricula associated with diversity and inclusion. It is clear in reading through all the transcripts, many struggled with their own mental health with the added burden of worrying about everyone else in their stakeholder circles,

encompassing school, community, and home. Seen as heroes at the outset of the pandemic, a growing national distrust added to that burden. In varying degrees, these leaders adapted to these challenges. It was clear that several of these leaders drew from their own core beliefs and sense of strength in navigating this new space, and this reminded us that we need to focus on how PPPs can prepare aspiring leaders to better understand their core beliefs and attain an understanding of the need to take care of themselves so they can take care of others. Maak et al. (2021) in their study of how global political leaders managed the Covid crisis, argued that it is time to re-examine leader development "and encourage 'real world learning' through programmes which challenge participants to face challenges first-hand, whether these pertain to global pandemics, climate change, poverty, or inclusion" (p. 81). PPPs need strong partnerships with districts that afford residency experiences where aspiring leaders can experience this real-world learning.

This begins with the strong mentorship of candidates for the principalship, which is central to the research for improving PPPs (Herman, et al., 2022; Louis, et al., 2010; Mitgang, 2012). PPPs would benefit from helping candidates identify their strengths and areas for growth along with a focus on the dispositions needed to lead in situations that require adaptive leadership. Not only that, but almost every principal interviewed discussed the need for leaders to be comfortable with being vulnerable and honest in their decision-making and communication. This necessitates practice and having a team or group of colleagues on which to lean. While the principals in this study had to discover that group along the way, PPPs can assist in developing such groups earlier on so that these networks already exist.

Recommendations for Future Research

We recognize that there are limitations to this study as we interviewed principals only from one school district. Our experience, however, indicates that these stories are not unique to this setting. PPP's would benefit from more research on how effective principals from different school environments manage during a crisis. It would also be helpful to know which adaptations made during a crisis have continued to be sustained and beneficial.

We also do not want to insinuate that all principal preparation programs are lacking in terms of preparing leaders to be adaptive. Indeed, we keep the words of Heifetz in mind when he stated, "We own collective responsibility for the global conditions that we impact and that impact us. We will not make these changes based on authority-based leadership, but rather with each of us taking a leadership role" (Metcalf, 2016, n.p.).

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented phenomenon causing major disruption to many organizations, including schools. Leaders across the spectrum utilized multiple approaches to leadership depending on the situation, and certainly these types of leadership overlap in meaning and action and have value in different ways. As we read through these thick and rich descriptions of the leadership of these 17 principals, though, adaptive leadership became the foundation that stood out amongst other leadership approaches.

There is no doubt that "global conditions" will continue to impact the school building, and principals must be prepared to lead in these environments. Adaptive leadership has been a driving source in all sectors across the world (Goniewicz & Hertelendy, 2023). As stated before, our participants worried, "What if we don't get it right?" and it is realistic to understand that we will not always "get it right." We can, however, create spaces where leaders feel more prepared to enter crises, and adaptive leadership is one approach that could help current and future leaders to be proactive rather than reactive amid complex and compounded crises.

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