

## CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS - STYLES & LITERACIES

Jessica Flaxman 120 Education Consultancy  
Christopher Hancock, Head of School, Benchmark School  
David Weiner, Dean of Studies, Barrie School

### Context

Coronavirus Disease 2019, a novel, easily transmitted, and deadly illness with no vaccine or known treatment, has within a six month period touched every community around the globe, causing economies to shut down, institutions to halt operations, and supply chains and transportation routes to stall. Since the middle of March, 2020, institutions serving the public such as libraries, theaters, and schools across the United States have closed their doors. While post offices, grocery stores and gas stations -- deemed "essential" to sustain a bare-bones economy and social nexus -- have remained open, institutions serving the public have moved their operations online in an effort to stem the spread of COVID-19.

### Research Questions & Study Participants

This study explored how leaders in K-12 independent school education have managed this unprecedented crisis. Three researchers, each a member of the independent school sector and graduate students in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, conducted six semi-structured interviews with sitting heads of independent schools. Four female and two male heads of K-8, 5-12, and K-12 independent schools were selected by convenience. Two (one male, one female) were longstanding heads with over 15 years of experience; three (one male, two female) were seasoned Heads with between 4 and 7 years of experience; and one was in her second year of her first headship. Representing schools in the northeast, midwest, and western United States, these six heads of school shared insights around their respective leadership styles, crisis definitions, communication practices, and needed literacies within the context of this particular crisis.

### Crisis Leadership

Crisis Leadership is an evolving area of organizational behavior and psychology research wherein typical hallmarks of leadership, such as vision or a bias towards action, are insufficient for the immediate challenge. Petriglieri (2020) helps define crises as unanticipated tests of the internal and external systems created in a previous time. He states:

Crises always test visions, and most don't survive. Because when there's a fire in a factory, a sudden drop in revenues, a natural disaster, we don't need a call to action. We are already motivated to move, but we often flail. What we need is a type of holding so that we can move purposefully.

This *holding* interests us, as the heads of school with whom we spoke all described the work of the independent school leader during a crisis as being characterized by the need to contain, to calm, and to communicate.

Their definitions of a crisis, however, varied. Participants in this study generally defined a crisis as a situation that disrupts or upends the systems and operations of a school and threatens its future survival. They also identified their need to lean more into their authentic selves and rely on teams in order to respond to the unexpected. Seemingly a byproduct of crises, these adaptations were key indicators for heads that a crisis was at hand. Muffet-Willett and Kruse (2009) elaborate by stating, "High-quality crisis leadership relies on the application of core leadership skills, targeted training for the unfamiliar and responsiveness when a crisis occurs." While the definition of a crisis beyond COVID-19 among interviewees proved subjective, several leadership styles emerged clearly as hallmarks of independent school heads' crisis leadership.

### Leadership Styles in Crises: Four Emergent Themes

While examining crises in independent schools and specifically the current crisis of COVID-19, we asked one main question: How does leadership style change, if at all, during times of crisis? Some participants argued that leadership style doesn't

change; instead, one leans into their strengths as a leader, whether it's being even more empathetic and understanding of one's employees or focusing on finances to ensure that the school does not fail. Furthermore, heads adjusted their leadership styles gently, rather than explicitly and abruptly. As one head described, "I think if one starts to overly think how you lead you lose your leadership capacity. It's more that my leadership style has evolved. It's more like sanding a piece of wood than it is choosing a different piece of wood." Most, if not all heads, self-identified as adaptive and authentic leaders who believe in distributive leadership but are comfortable giving both focus and direction during crisis.

### **Theme 1: Emotional IQ & Relational Trust**

Specifically, one head argues that a school should be viewed as an organism that needs to be taken care of. This organism requires systems of care to ensure that one's employees make their mortgages, pay their rents, and take care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. When the news of COVID-19 hit, one head made sure to be "out everywhere," walking the hallways, going in and out of bathrooms, or standing at the bottom of the stairs to genuinely communicate to their employees that they care and that, as a community, they would get through this crisis. Interactions such as these help build relational trust (Batiste, 2012) which is of paramount importance if one is to guide their employees through a difficult financial and health crisis like COVID-19. Of particular note and worthy of future study, all male heads interviewed described themselves as needing to be "active listeners," while female heads did not note this explicitly when discussing crisis leadership and trust-building.

### **Theme 2: Never Worry Alone**

Every participant interviewed talked at length about the importance of teams during times of crisis. One head went as far to say they had "twenty minute check-ins every day, and longer, two to three hour meetings each week to manage the early stages of this crisis." Moreover, it was important to have "some pretty nimble decision making that was still collaborative" as opposed to the head going solo or only consulting a limited coterie of colleagues. Another head shared the similar importance of swiftly and thoughtfully bringing a team together: "My leadership literacy would include now, get out of your own head and use what's around you. Quickly. And benefit hugely from the wisdom in the group." In response to COVID-19, heads of school spent an inordinate amount of time structuring, organizing, and empowering their teams to be successful.

### **Theme 3: "Be Like a Duck" & plan, plan, plan...**

One participant described their role during a crisis as that of a duck: "I may be paddling furiously underneath, but I'm going to try to project a sense [that] we're going to be okay." As part of being calm, a head also needs to be the "community focuser" during a crisis. Especially during COVID-19, so much changed so quickly that it was up to the head to sit down with their leadership team and establish priorities. What needs to be done now? What can wait? What long-term goals do we need to start thinking about? As another head of school noted, "planning is our friend." In short, heads need to think slowly but act fast. In practice, this means spending a lot of time with your leadership team to suss out the details of decisions and to anticipate responses from your constituents (parents, students, faculty, board) while ensuring that you respond to crisis situations in a timely manner.

### **Theme 4: Communication, the Core Component of Crisis Leadership**

Perhaps expectedly, the importance of communication during crises emerged as a dominant theme during interviews. Interestingly, adapted crisis communications appeared not simply as a shift in modalities – from coffee and speeches to Zoom meetings and virtual open houses. Rather, communication was the clear delivery mechanism for a head's shifting leadership style. It was the physical manifestation of their adaptation to what the current pandemic required. It was both a mirror and a window.

Half of the heads interviewed noted that as soon as the crisis unfolded in late February and early March their priority shifted to caring for their faculty, students, and parents. One head even shared, "I send out Sunday messages to families. That's a homily, frankly. What they want is a pastor." Another noted, "A school is not a business, although there's business in it and woe to you if you don't figure that out...It's an organism...if every day we make something better, that's a noble goal." The shift to written expressions of their care, rather than those typically done in-person, was a self-identified strength and reflection of their emotional presence. Further, those heads who identified themselves as relational leaders were challenged by shifting modalities of communication foisted upon them by the pandemic. They could no longer sit, talk, build intimacy and convey empathy through traditional means. They had to convey it through mechanisms not often associated with care or compassion, like Zoom conferencing, recorded videos, or email.

In particular, the performative elements of their role as leaders were amplified. One head chose frequent virtual town halls to share information and express care. Another shared the challenge of properly expressing their own grief, loss, pain, and anger

via email. A third introduced the yearly auction online through video dressed in a dark brown suit with a black top hat admonishing participants to “dig deep into their pockets” and, if possible, “their neighbors’ pockets.” Conversely, many expressed feeling hamstrung by email as a mode of communication and two heads self-reported taking too long between communications relative to what the community needed. “It’s nothing but mistakes over here,” one head remarked.

## **Crisis Leadership in Context**

The qualitative interviews conducted for this study reveal that crisis communication privileges candor over charisma. It obliges leaders to think creatively about how clearly and how often they share information. Crisis communication specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic also requires new modes through which independent school heads communicate and reflect their own emotions, of which many such modes are newly developing literacies for school heads and fertile ground for future study. Unease with the permanence of these new forms of communication and their impact on the performative elements of a head’s work in crisis is unambiguous within the research. Despite, or perhaps because of, the way that these adaptations created discomfort among heads, care for others and communication with them emerged as their primary leadership literacy.

We also noted a strong refrain concerning the need for financial literacy from many of the heads we interviewed. Before the current crisis, independent schools were already highly concerned about their financial sustainability as tuition and expenses have continued to increase over the past decade. Now, with a radically shrinking economy and continued shifts to enrollment and full-pay students, independent schools, particularly those with small or no endowments and with student bodies of less than three hundred, are on high alert. That said, our interviews revealed that school heads with strong enrollment and endowments were more likely to see crisis and disruption as an opportunity to innovate and improve their systems.

While racial literacy did not emerge as critical to independent school leadership during crises, we believe that if we had conducted our interviews just a few weeks later, after the murder of George Floyd and the Black@[SCHOOL] movement in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, racial literacy would have been the primary literacy on leaders’ minds. This fact speaks to the importance of *context* when conducting practitioner research on crisis leadership, as the definition or contours of a given crisis will determine participant responses. We believe that as important as financial literacy is to independent school leadership, racial literacy remains an urgent area of attention and growth.

## **References:**

Batiste, H.E. (2012). *Toward an understanding of the role of relational trust for new heads of independent schools*. [Doctoral dissertation: University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest: UMI 3530065.

Muffet-Willet, S., and Kruse, S. (2009). “Crisis Leadership: Past Research and Future Directions.” *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, Vol, 3, No. 3 (248-258).

Petriglieri, G. “The Psychology Behind Effective Crisis Leadership.” *Harvard Business Review*, April 22, 2020. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/the-psychology-behind-effective-crisis-leadership>

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

---

**Source URL:** <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/crisis-leadership-independent-schools-styles-literacies>