

Dialogue 17: Adaptive Leadership in Crisis Times

Virtual meeting – 18 August 2021

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01 Setting the Scene

The first part of the dialogue explored the utility of adaptive leadership in times of crisis. Dr Brian Chinsamy (Trustee of the Early Care Foundation) gave an overview of current circumstances, the place of adaptive leadership in addressing the “new normal” and how leaders can use self-care to cultivate the kind of resilience that will help them be more responsive to their teams.

Mduduzi Qwabe (of the Catholic Institute of Education) moderated a panel discussion in relation to Dr Brian Chinsamy’s presentation. Panellists reflected on the application of adaptive leadership against the backdrop of their community and school contexts.

In the second part of the dialogue, participants had a more in-depth discussion on adaptive leadership in crisis times in break-away Zoom groups, and returned to share high-level feedback of their discussions in plenary.

Overall, participants walked away with both the recognition that things will never be the same again, and a consensus that there is value in using the adaptive leadership approach as a creative problem solving strategy in times of crisis.

These *Meeting Highlights* provide an overview of the main themes and issues discussed, and should be viewed together with the speakers’ presentations. Links to the presentations are provided in the text.

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Presented by the Catholic Institute of Education, the LRS Academy, Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, Sasol Foundation and BRIDGE.

Principals Upfront gives principals a platform to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership. The dialogues also enable those involved in supporting school leadership to develop a deeper understanding of the roles that principals play.

02 Welcome with Mentimeter Activity

Participants were invited to check-in with a word phrase that describes their definition of leadership. The illustration below is a snapshot of some of the thoughts expressed:



03 Presentation 1

Introduction

Dr Anusha Naidu, from the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, gave context for the dialogue by saying that schools thrive on consistency, routine and certainty and when that is disrupted, it is difficult to recover consistent service delivery. In the past year, every leader, in every sphere, has faced moments of crisis ranging from minor bumps to major challenges. It is important to acknowledge that school leaders are navigating unfamiliar territory. Nobody was prepared for the effects and impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic – school leaders are no exception.

It's been a difficult journey for leaders across sectors, who have all had to grapple with weaving stability into the work environment while responding to the impact of COVID-19 and the various changes it has introduced to schooling and working contexts. It is for this reason that the 17th Principals Upfront Dialogue elected to focus on adaptive leadership in crisis times. This topic bears the question, how do we help? How do we help school leaders and managers navigate these murky waters? In a time where school leaders are faced with enormous amounts of responsibility-including assuming responsibility for teachers, employees, learners and parents who are all struggling with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty-how do we best support school leaders to adapt to change and show up in crisis times? Adaptive leadership in times of crisis acknowledges change and equips leaders to adapt to change; become problem solvers and work effectively with a diverse and fragmented society, which is also characterised by social and economic upheaval.

Click [here](#) to view this presentation.

PRESENTATION 1: *Adaptive Leadership in Crisis Times*— Dr Brian Chinsamy, Trustee of the Early Care Foundation (EFC)



Dr Brian Chinsamy framed his presentation in terms of three key areas: change and destruction, factors leading to leadership derailment and leadership adaptability.

Our Reality: The new normal

The current landscape, known as the “new normal” is characterised by the global pandemic, mergers and acquisitions, corporate restructuring, increasing globalisation, rapid evolution of technology, downsizing and market-related upheavals. We are not going back to any kind of normalcy, with the contraction of the economy, increasing unemployment, alarming rates of learning losses and with about 750 000 children dropping out of public schooling systems since the onset of the pandemic.

In this prevailing context, it is important to pause to consider what school leaders and their employees are facing. The following are the foremost factors:

- **Uncertainty of position and place**- this has led to a lot of angst and apprehension about the relevance of people’s jobs, skills and broader questions about job security
- **High levels of anxiety and feelings of vulnerability** – feelings of isolation and disconnection tend to add to the uncertainty of the times.
- **Being overwhelmed with balancing too many things** - linked to online schooling, working from home and familial responsibilities overlapping with the work day.
- **Social isolation and the weakening of bonds that would normally be a source of emotional support.**
- **The resurfacing of earlier traumas**- exacerbated by anxiety, uncertainty and strained efforts at maintaining wellbeing in crisis times.
- **Lost sense of security and normalcy which triggers grief.**

Circumstances under the new normal have created the VUCA (Volatility Uncertainty Complexity Ambiguity) World, but these also presents opportunities to reconceptualise VUCA and transform it from **Volatility Uncertainty Complexity Ambiguity to Vision Understanding Clarity and Agility.**

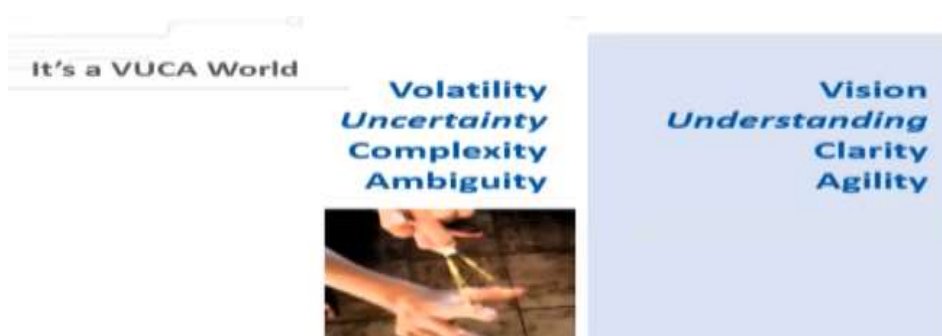
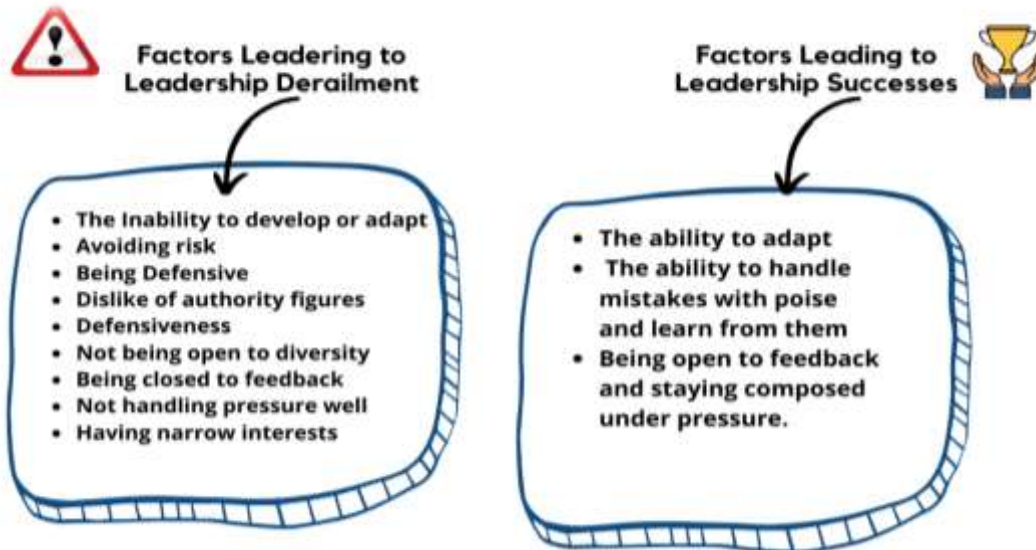


Figure 1: Presentation Slide - Dr Brian Chinsamy on Adaptive Leadership in Crisis Times

Factors that Derail Adaptive Leadership

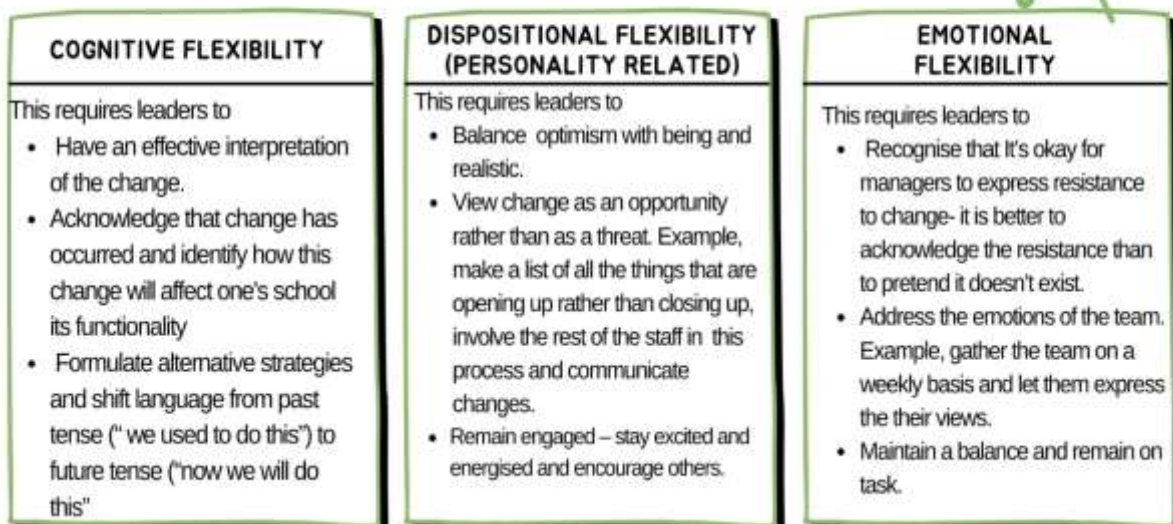
Drawing on research from the Centre for Creative Leadership, Dr Chinsamy noted the following as factors that contribute to leadership derailment and success

“This new normal has brought a lot of fear and change. Change can be unnerving, unsettling and intimidating. And with fear, usually comes stress and resistance. Recent research in leadership shows that leaders who can adapt to change, as opposed to just coping with it will deliver outstanding results” (Dr Brian Chinsamy)



The Three Main Components of Leadership Adaptability

There are three main components of adaptive leadership: cognitive, dispositional and emotional flexibility. These three components entail the following:



Action steps for increasing leadership adaptability

In addition to the three components of leadership adaptability, Dr Chinsamy shared the following action steps for increasing leadership adaptability

- **Embrace Curiosity** – ask questions that will help you understand how change is affecting students and staff.
- **Remain open to change** – don't get too attached to a single plan. Change is happening a lot faster now, than before. Have alternative plans and strategies ready and adapt them as needed.
- **Create support systems and ask for help-** rely on professionals, colleagues and others who can provide social support. Leaders do not have to do it alone to be effective.
- **Increase self-awareness** – the first pillar of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. Other aspects of our lives can only develop as deeply as our self-awareness has been developed.
- **Embrace new environments and situations** - Remain Open to change, reframe threatening situations as challenges and opportunities to grow.

In times of crisis, there are two directions human nature can take us



Figure 2: Presentation Slide - Dr Brian Chinsamy on Adaptive Leadership In Crisis Times

In times of crisis, leaders are often responsive to explicitly stated expectations that are defined by their roles and job descriptions (e.g., accountability, strategy etc.), but what make leaders effective is the ability to respond to softer expectations that may be implicitly stated (e.g., giving meaning and direction, providing inspiration and acting on suggestions etc.) Citing a Gallup 2020 Survey, Dr Chinsamy added that the top four universal needs that staff expect from their leaders are: trust, compassion, stability and hope.

“If you can take care of yourself, you will be better able to care of others. In terms of your own resilience- what are you doing for yourself? What are you doing for your health? What are you doing for your own mental wellbeing and mindfulness? What are the things that are tripping you up? What are your own saboteurs?” (Dr Brian Chinsamy)

Dr Chinsamy concluded by urging leaders to prioritise self-care in order to increase their capacity to care for and hold space for others. Self-care for leaders, he argued, can be incorporated as daily activities, tackling different aspects of one's being. The illustration below is a summary of suggested activities to keep leaders physically healthy, mentally engaged and more able to forge resilience through self-care.

Dr Chinsamy concluded by urging leaders to prioritise self-care in order to increase their capacity to care for and hold space for others. Self-care for leaders, he argued, can be incorporated as daily activities, tackling different aspects of one's being. The illustration below is a summary of suggested activities to keep leaders physically healthy, mentally engaged and more able to forge resilience through self-care.

Physical Well-being

HOW TO IMPROVE PHYSICAL WELLBEING



Figure 3: Presentation Slide- Dr Brian Chinsamy on Adaptive Leadership in Crisis Times

Questions and Comments

In response to the question, how can school leaders adapt to bearaucracy because adapatability efforts are often curtailed by directives from superiors, Dr Chinsamy expressed the following:

- Leadership is about courage and authenticity.
- Integrity is doing what is right over what is easy and convenient.
- Do what is right and build alliances around what is right and not what is easy or convenient. It will always pay off.

04 Panel Discussion

Next, Mduduzi Qwabe, from The Catholic Institute of Education, introduced the panel discussion on adaptive leadership. The panellists were asked to introduce themselves, their contexts and the communities that they work in. Next, panellists engaged Dr Brian Chinsamy on the concept of adaptive leadership in crisis times.

THE CHAIR AND PANEL



Mduduzi Qwabe,
Catholic Institute of
Education



Dr Brian Chinsamy,
Early Care Foundation



Mpho Motsoane, Abram
Hlophe Primary school



Daya Chetty, Gauteng
Department of Education



Selwyn Swartz,
Sterkstroom School

DISCUSSION

Mpho's adaptive leadership approach rests on the "Four As": accountability, anticipation, articulation and adaptability. School leaders have been faced with greater responsibilities since the onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19. As the principal of Abram Hlophe Primary School, Mpho had to be responsive to the health and operational changes in the school. To this end, she was responsible for leading the "learning, unlearning and re-learning process" for learners, parents, staff and SGB. The management team formed a Covid-19 committee that would be responsible for the hygiene and safety protocols in the school. Recognising the increased anxiety levels

in both the school and the greater community, the team also had to develop strategies to support the school and community through continuous engagement, transparency and information sharing. All in all, the school followed a developmental approach which required adaptability, on-going regulation of distress, trusting people with responsibility and protecting leadership voices from below.

Having left the schooling sector in 2019, Daya acknowledged this has been an interesting time to observe school leaders' responses and strategies under the "new normal". Daya noted that the schools that were able to cope with the changes brought on by Covid-19 pandemic were schools whose leadership already had foresight about the importance of adaptability in teaching and learning. Some of these schools were able to integrate ICT frameworks into their academic programme, while others were able to make booklets for parents to collect to ensure learning continues. The changes in the new normal also exposed our inequalities in the education sector, most notably in the availability of facilities and resources

Questions and Comments From Participants

There's overwhelming fear and anxiety in our communities. This has been exacerbated by the looting-related unrest in the country. How can school leaders address and support communities through broader anxiety and distress manifesting in the school environment?

- It is important to get to the root cause. For example dealing with basic hygiene factors to mitigate COVID-19 risks if that is the source of anxiety for most people. Fear and anxiety must always be traced back to the root cause. In issues related to the distress of the greater community, it might be worthwhile to involve parents and the greater community in the process of crafting strategies and responses.

How do principals strike a balance amidst all the pressures from various stakeholders in the school community?

- It's important to get a sufficient amount of the parent community together with the teaching community – we need to find common ground and take ownership of the decisions that we make. There's great value in public participation- it yields responsibility and accountability

Can you comment on the role of other stakeholders in this scourge?

- Maintain trust and try to understand what the root of people's anxieties and fears are. Do not just denigrate people's fears as excuses or laziness. Lead with empathy, try to understand people's points of view and treat each team member as a valuable and integral part of the team.

05 Group Discussion

In reflecting on the presentation and panel discussion in the breakaway groups, shared the following responses:

Group 1

- Adaptive leadership requires effective communication. Example, Increased communication and visual reinforcement through signage etc.
- It is even more important to have distributed leadership in times of crisis. Everybody must be proactive and be empowered to lead.
- The "new normal" can be used as an opportunity to do some kind of action research or toolkit that can be shared to guide strategies in similar circumstances in future.

Group 2

- It's become increasingly important for school leaders to create safe spaces to share challenges and debrief their experiences.
- The mental wellbeing of school leaders and staff alike should be prioritised.
- In the "new normal", things like safety protocols must be policy informed and well communicated. Everybody must know what to do in times of crisis so that fear and anxiety is minimised.
- Communicating effectively with stakeholders may also entail re-assuring members of the team and providing inspiration.

Group 3

- It is critical for school leaders to try to model behaviour that people will feel good emulating
- In times of crisis, including all stakeholders in decision making processes can be extremely difficult. Adaptive leadership may look like adapting to new forms of communication, such as facilitating parental involvement through WhatsApp groups etc.

06 Close out and Vote of Thanks

Anacletta Koloko from Sasol Foundation synthesised the discussions and concluded the day's proceedings by reiterating that we need to adapt to change in every aspect-we are not going back to how things were before the "new normal". It's important to minimise resistance; seek collaboration and acknowledge that change has occurred. She encouraged participants to lead boldly and without fear.

Participants checked out of through a Mentimeter exercise in which they reflected on their most important take-away from the meeting. The illustration below is a snapshot of the responses shared.



The date of the next *Principals Upfront* dialogue will be communicated as soon as information is available.

Dialogue participants are reminded of BRIDGE's knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE's Knowledge Hub. To access the Knowledge Hub, click [here](#).

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If there are any burning issues you would like to have addressed, or if you would like more information on this dialogue series, contact Patience Voller at patience@BRIDGE.org.za



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