

Australian school principals & COVID 19

Leading in Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environments



Grounding & anchoring

Safety as a human priority

The global education community is experiencing one of the most complex, challenging, and uncertain periods destabilising Australian school principals. This pandemic is affecting ALL Principals and ALL Australian school communities. Each school community is having its own unique experience however this phenomenon unites us.

We are aware of the increased demands and pressures that are currently upon you. This pandemic has, and will, change the way things operate in your communities for some time. There is no doubt that this has already led to an increase in stress and pressure on principals to navigate the demands of your professional roles alongside personal concerns and struggles.

Being a school leader is a challenging at the best of times. We want to encourage that you take care of yourselves in order to have the energy to meet the daily demands imposed by this public health emergency.

VUCA Leadership

Typically a military term VUCA leadership and has since evolved. “Volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous” —VUCA, for short. VUCA describes perfectly what is happening in the global world today. Typical leadership methods and strategies don’t fully equip leaders to lean into these environments. Harvard business school and the global leadership community view the anecdote to VUCA environments as the descriptors below.

Vision – leaders need the ability to see through the chaos to have a clear vision for their organisation

Understanding – With their vision in hand, leaders need in-depth understanding of their organisation’s capabilities and strategies to take advantage of rapidly changing circumstances by playing to their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses

Courage – Now more than ever, leaders need the courage to step up to these challenges and make decisions that embody risks. They cannot afford to keep their heads down, using traditional management techniques while avoiding criticism and risk-taking.

Adaptability – If ever there were a need for leaders to be flexible in adapting to this rapidly changing environment, this is it. Long-range plans are often obsolete by the time they are approved. Instead, flexible tactics are required for rapid adaptation to changing external circumstances, without altering strategic course.

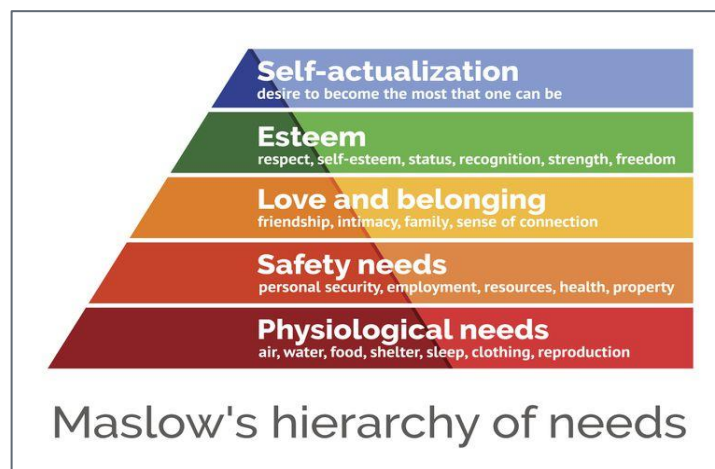
Helpful ways to reframe unhelpful thoughts

“I’m having a rough time, but I’ll make it through.”

“I’m a good leader and our school can move through this.”

“I’m trying hard and I’m my doing your best.”

Threat to safety and dysregulation



Most Principals would be aware of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs for humans. One of the highest priority needs is the need for safety. Right now many people feel like their safety is compromised. The most important and critical point right now is for humans to find a safe and stable space.

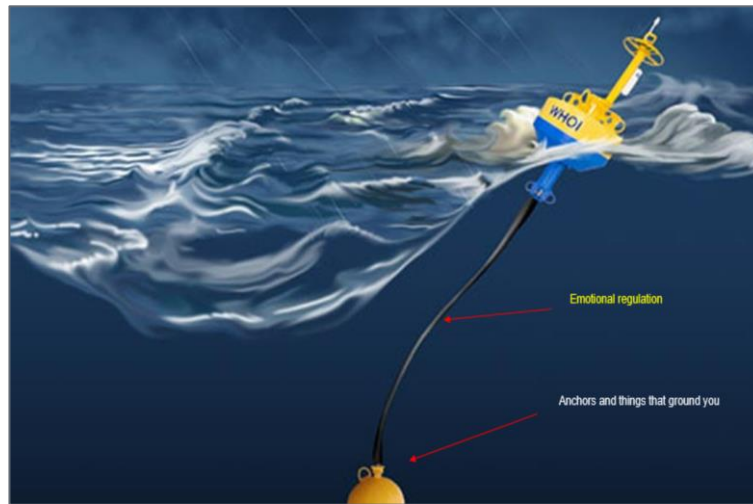
People want to experience order, predictability and control in their lives. All humans require emotional security, financial security, social stability, stability of health and wellbeing in order to function and perform at the very basic level. These needs can be fulfilled by a range of things; predictable and habitual routine every day, family and relationships, and grounding our behaviors, emotions, and thoughts.

In addition coronavirus risk requires physical distancing and isolation which is a powerful paradox to our human instinct and nature when we are experiencing stress or distress. This destabilises our central nervous system, our emotional regulation, and our cognitive processing and ability to cope.

Safety is a primal neural circuit. Seeing someone’s face, hearing their voice, is a powerful reassuring cue of safety. Connecting and communicating should not be about content but about co-regulation. It’s about our innate sense of safety.

People who feel safe and regulated are more; open to others, aware of self and others, clearer thinking, have the ability to be kind and caring, can be generous, can function and order thinking, can be productive. We should pay attention to our routine, how we are connecting, and how we are communicating.

Grounding and anchoring to lead resiliently



Even the most resilient adults at the moment are operating from a lowered window of tolerance and lowered threshold to cope and manage. This might manifest in anger that quickly arises, extreme emotions waving over you, or the inability to manage things that were previously manageable. We often feel like we have to avoid the distress as opposed to lean into it flexibly and then let it pass, much like the buoy tethered to and anchor.

It's really important that you're aware of your lowered tolerance in order to manage it. If you find yourself being swept away with emotions more than 3-5 times a day then you have a mid-low level of coping, if it happens 5-10 times a day then you have a very low capacity to cope and need to put some strategies in place. It's good to use a simple 1-10 scale of stress and distress. If you are feeling you are a 5-8 on the distress scale then employ strategies for yourself and have agency in self-care. If you reach 8, 9, or 10 on the distress scale then you absolutely require support from others and maybe professionals

Grounding exercises are helpful for many situations where you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or distracted with destabilising thoughts or feelings. If you find yourself getting caught up in strong emotions like anxiety, fear, sadness, or anger, or if you catch yourself engaging in stressful circling thoughts, or if you experience grounding activities and exercises can help bring you back to a stable and safe space.

It can be helpful to have a selection of grounding activities and strategies. For example; exercise, mindfulness, family, gardening, deep breathing, making tea, exercises that you can draw upon at different times. Just like no one technique works for all people, we often find that not all techniques work at all times. One thing you can do is reflect on what works for you and be aware of rising stress and distress.

Try the 5-4-3-2-1 method

Working backward from 5, use your senses to list things you notice around you. For example, you might start by listing five things you hear, then four things you see, then three things you can touch from where you're sitting, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Basic steps for Principals to regulate responses – COVID 19

- Maintain a sense of routine as much as possible. This is the most critical thing that creates safety.
- Limit or consider over exposure to the media or news, and support the provision of only factual information Be mindful of exposure to information through stories, print media, tv, radio, and social media. It can be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.
- Check-in regularly about things they may have heard, seen, or feelings they have experienced
- Avoid catastrophizing and ensure your behavior and reactions aren't elevating your staff or communities reactions. Stay calm, speak calmly, stay grounded, and allow them to feel safe. Explain that people react differently to stressful situations and that being calm is important
- Find trusted sources of information and fact-check about decisions that impact your school community
- Check in with other principal colleagues who are experiencing similar leadership complexities and stressors. It can always help to talk with a trusted friend, colleague, or another principal if it all feels a bit much
- Remember to consider your mental health as well as your physical health
- Don't dismiss or minimise your response it's a valid human reaction. It is reasonable to be concerned. Some of us are feeling really scared, frustrated, angry and sad at the moment and these are normal feels to extraordinary events
- Do things that make you feel physically and emotionally safe
- Create an honest open line of communication and its ok to show vulnerability and that you don't have all the answers
- Engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of alcohol and other drugs might be counterproductive).
- Maintain a healthy headspace include sleep, exercise, balanced diet, mindfulness, noticing signs of stress and feeling overwhelmed, talking to others,
- There are support lines and services for adults if you feel really overwhelmed
- Be self-compassionate – everyone is finding hard to operate at optimum function right now so show some kindness and gentleness to yourself.

headspace would like to acknowledge and extend our profound gratitude for all of your hard work and leadership during such an complex period. Communities rely so heavily on school leaders as figureheads during a crisis - they couldn't do this without you. We want to support you, so you can effectively get on with the job of supporting your communities.

If you need to speak to someone:

Contact your EAP
Call your GP
Beyondblue **1300 22 4636**
Lifeline **13 11 14**
1800RESPECT **1800 737 732**