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# Guide for Engaging the Stories

This guide begins with an overview of caring school leadership practices that are illustrated in the stories. It concludes with two sets of questions for reflecting upon and discussing the stories. The first set aims to promote deeper understanding of different aspects of caring and caring leadership during crisis. The second is designed to help you apply insights and lessons from the stories to your own situation and practice.

## Overview of Practices

The stories in this book took place in two arenas for the practice of caring school leadership. The first are interpersonal relationships of school leaders with students, teachers, and staff. The second is the community inside the school. Regardless of the arena of practice, each story makes visible in one way or another the aims, positive virtues and mindsets, and competencies of caring. Many illustrate the outcomes of caring to students, teachers, and staff. As we mentioned earlier, not all of our stories are clearly positive. You may find some troublesome, and some reveal problems that may arise out of the best intentions.

Many aspects of caring school leadership practice are illustrated in these stories. We do not pretend that they capture the full range and situational variations of this practice. Some of the most important aspects of practice in these stories are listed below. Look for and reflect upon them as you read. Stay attuned to other aspects of caring leadership practice you may see.<sup>75</sup>

## Aspects of a Caring School Leadership Practice

1. **Being present.** It is difficult to imagine being able to know students and staff, understand their needs and interests, and be caring of them if school leaders are not present and accessible. Presence is physical (and virtual) and mental, the latter meaning that school leaders must be continually mindful of others to be caring of them. Look for different ways that school leaders are present in these stories.
2. **Attending and inquiring.** Several stories illustrate different ways that school leaders can be attentive to students and teachers to know and understand them, their needs, and concerns, so as to be caring of them, and ways that school leaders can be similarly attentive to school community. Look for ways that school leaders may observe, inquire, hear, and listen. Look for ways that school leaders may try to see crisis through the eyes of others, especially students.
3. **Expressing empathy, compassion, kindness, and altruism.** Look for the enactment of these and other positive virtues and mindsets of caring described in the introduction.
4. **Acting on behalf of others.** These stories show examples of different ways in which school leaders act or give care on behalf of students and teachers to help and support them during crisis. This assistance includes emotional, psychological, medical, and material support. Several stories show how acting on behalf of students and teachers can conflict with district rules and how school leaders bend these rules toward students and teachers rather than bend students and teachers toward the rules.

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<sup>75</sup> An in-depth discussion of these and other caring leadership practices can be found in *Caring School Leadership*, and additional stories of these and other aspects of practice can be found in *Stories of Caring School Leadership*.

5. **Promoting the core values and purposes of the school.** Several stories illustrate how school leaders stay focused and help others stay focused during crisis on the core values and purposes that define the school community. Among these values, especially in times of crisis, is putting the health, safety, and well-being of students, teachers, staff, and families at the fore. These values include mutual commitment to and responsibility for the care of others. Look for ways that school leaders emphasize and enforce values of caring and support, respect, honor, love, empathy, compassion, and importantly optimism and hope.
6. **Creating means of social connection.** In these stories are illustrations of ways that school leaders provide opportunities for social connection. Even as crises separate people physically and emotionally, school leaders can keep interpersonal connections strong, checking in with everyone, building links, and creating occasions for togetherness to work or to maintain social and emotional attachment.
7. **Making meaning.** Several stories highlight being aware of things that give people meaning at school and in their work. They provide examples of school leaders helping students, teachers, staff, and parents make meaning of crises and the implications for themselves, their families, and their schools. We see school leaders find ways to maintain traditions and routines and preserve symbols large and small that help bind the school community together. Several stories reveal the importance of history to school community, even as a new chapter in that history is being written.
8. **Communicating.** Several stories focus on the importance of communication—formal and informal, individual and corporate—as a means of being in community during crises. These stories illustrate the importance of clarity, authenticity, truthfulness, accuracy, transparency, currentness, and positivity. They illustrate the importance of keeping the school community informed of the crisis, being real while maintaining optimism.
9. **Securing resources and removing obstacles.** A number of stories show leaders actively seeking and acquiring resources to help their schools encounter and recover from crisis. These include financial and material resources as well as therapeutic resources, such as professional support and counselors. Several stories show leaders connecting members of their school communities to sources of support beyond the school. There are examples of school leaders creating safe spaces for emotional expression and repair. We also see leaders unleash the resources of strong, positive social relationships once a crisis occurs. Some stories tell of leaders working to remove structural and other obstacles to caring and support.
10. **Accepting responsibility for and sharing leadership.** These stories illustrate the many ways in which school leaders directly assume responsibility for leading during crisis. Look for examples where school leaders also bring others into this leadership, creating opportunities for student and teacher “voice” and influence and in the process improving the effectiveness of crisis leadership and strengthening the school community.

The stories reveal several important qualities of caring leadership such as vulnerability, humility, and a willingness of leaders to do what they ask others to do. They include creativity and, importantly in crisis situations, bricolage—creatively constructing something out of a range of available things. Several stories show the importance of being able to make tough calls. Many others show the importance of protecting the safety and integrity of the school community and its members, even as

such actions pose risk to the school leader. Last but not least, these stories show the importance of leadership that is both present in the midst of a crisis as well as looking to a better future when the crisis subsides.

As you read, reflect upon, and discuss these stories, consider the following questions.

## Questions That Promote Understanding

1. How does each story reflect the three foundational elements of caring school leadership described in the introduction: (a) the aims of caring, (b) positive virtues and mindsets of caring, and (c) competent enactment? In what ways might these three elements be strong or weak in the story? How might these strengths or weaknesses shape the actions and interactions of the school leader and any outcomes apparent? How might caring in the story be seen as everyday work, even during crisis, rather than as something extra that school leaders do? How can caring demonstrated by school leaders help others to be more caring?
2. How might the school leader's assumptions, understandings, and biases affect the way each story unfolds and the subsequent outcomes?
3. How might different contexts affect the story?
  - The nature of different types of crisis situations
  - The qualities and characteristics of interpersonal relationships
  - The organizational context of the school or setting and the surrounding environment
4. What professional and personal ethical issues do these stories raise? What legal issues? Where such issues are apparent, what advice would you give the school leader to address them?
5. In what ways are understanding of students, teachers, and staff as persons, learners, and employees important to the actions and interactions of school leaders? In what ways do school leaders' efforts to further such knowledge and understanding contribute to their ability to be caring? In what ways do insufficient or incorrect knowledge and understanding make caring more difficult or less effective?
6. How do these stories help you better understand the types of assistance that might be helpful to students, teachers, staff, and others? How do these stories help you better understand how the way such assistance is given may affect the outcome?
7. In these stories, how might school leader caring contribute to the ability and the motivation of others to be more caring of each other? How might the context of crisis help promote or impede caring among others?
8. What do you see as the main lesson or lessons of each story? If you were to write a moral for each story, what would it be?
9. What is your personal reaction to each story? Why are you reacting this way? What might be influencing your thinking?
10. Imagine that the school leader in the story asked you, "What do you think about what I said and what I did?" Looking through the eyes of the different people in the story, how would you respond? What advice would you give to this school leader?

## Questions That Prompt Application

1. How might your own assumptions, preconceptions, and points of view influence how you read and make meaning of these stories? Jot down a few of your assumptions and preconceptions. Does the exercise of jotting them down prompt you to any action? If so, what would it be?
2. Consider your understanding of yourself as a caring person and a caring educator and leader, including your strengths and weaknesses in being caring of others. Consider your understanding of what the professional role of a school leader requires of you; what your situation calls on you to do; and what your students, your teachers and staff, and your school's parents and community expect of you. How does your thinking and sense of self affect how you practice caring generally and in times of crisis? Think of a moment of crisis that happened during the past 12 months and jot down how your sense of self affected how you practiced caring in that situation.
3. Put yourself in the position of the school leader who is the focus of each story. Would you think and act in the same way in the situation described? Why or why not? In what ways might you think and act differently? Why? Select a story that parallels something that has happened in your leadership practice. How did you behave in that situation? What are the similarities and differences between how you practiced caring and how the school leaders in the story practiced caring?
4. For each story, recall a similar, actual situation in your school. How would you retell the story for your own setting, with yourself as the focal school leader? In what ways is your story similar? In what ways is your story different? To what do you attribute these similarities and differences?
5. After reading the stories, which caring practices or leadership strategies would you like to incorporate into your own leadership practice? Why? Which practices would you not want to emulate? Why?