Turning Leadership Upside-Down and Outside-In During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has led many to question how education and schooling are supposed to continue in a world of uncertainty. This case follows the journey of Mariam, an Ontario elementary school principal, as she pivoted her leadership while transitioning between in-person and virtual schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case narrative describes the events that turned Mariam's leadership upside-down and required her to adapt to meet the needs of the school community; in the process, however, she forgot about her own needs. Crisis leadership forced her to learn, unlearn, and relearn her beliefs about her leadership choices and purpose. The case includes teaching notes and two activities: (a) using a crisis leadership framework for reflecting on the learning, unlearning, and relearning of education, schooling, and the purpose of educational leadership during a pandemic, and (b) strategies to help leaders refocus from the outside in using self-care. Instructors can use this case in graduate-level leadership courses and for professional development.

Keywords: School leadership, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis leadership framework, self-care

> Conflict is the primary engine of creativity and innovation. People don't learn by staring into a mirror; people learn by encountering differences. – Ronald A. Heifetz (1994)

The COVID-19 pandemic has made both researchers and practitioners deeply reconsider aspects of education that have long been taken for granted. For example, how we conduct day-to-day school operations, educate children, and, most importantly, lead our schools. This case is based on real events and captures the experiences of school principals who have lived through and led the complex challenges presented by COVID-19. The case narrative highlights the transition from face-to-face to virtual schooling and the challenges associated with this move. The teaching notes provide two activities: (a) using a crisis leadership framework to reflect on and create opportunities for leading post-pandemic and (b) finding strategies to focus on self-care.

Case Narrative

Mariam is a school principal with over 15 years of experience. Mariam has worked in the same school board and community in Southern Ontario for her entire education career. She has been the principal of her current school for 5 years in a small tourist community with a range of mid-to-low class families. Her school's families, who worked mostly in the tourist industry prior to the pandemic, experienced added economic and financial stress. As is common within many smaller community schools, family and school staff relationships were relatively strong, and Mariam's school was no exception. Therefore, when the families struggled, the school staff also experienced the impact.

Mariam had been listening to the news of the COVID-19 outbreak, which felt like it was happen-

ing on the other side of the world. During the week leading up to the announcement that schools were closing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a parent emailed Mariam with concerns about this "new virus" and strongly suggested that she position staff at each entrance to ensure that students properly sanitized their hands. Mariam assured her that there was nothing to worry about and told her, "This is a pandemic in China and Europe, not here in Canada, and certainly not in our little town." Mariam was secretly concerned but did not want to cause unnecessary panic in her school community. She decided to call her health and safety lead and superintendent to satisfy her own uncertainty. All three were unaware of the magnitude of what was ahead. Mariam read the first school closure announcement on a Twitter feed after school on Thursday, March 12th, 2020—the day before the much-anticipated March school break. Even though there was much buzz about the looming virus on every news station, the news still came as a shock. Mariam thought: "How could this be happening. School never closes, and now the whole education system is being shut down!"

The news resulted in extremely high levels of uncertainty and anxiety in the entire school community and beyond. The most stable institutions—schools—were shut down due to a virus that had caused a global pandemic. The following day, the first letter from the Ministry of Education (MOE) was released, but it left more questions than answers. Mariam's inbox was filled with questions from staff members and families. For the first time in her career, she had no answers. It was then that she realized that education, schooling, and her leadership were going to be turned upside-down, and all that she previously believed and did was going to be challenged. She swallowed hard and knew it was time to adapt and shift to crisis leadership—survival mode.

Leading from Home

In the days that followed, Mariam settled into a *leading from home* routine. It felt surreal and sometimes next to impossible to lead her school while not *in* the school. She sat in front of her computer all day (and sometimes late into the evening), balancing the continuously changing policies and practice with the back and forth of online meetings and phone calls. The MOE had closed all publicly funded schools with the goal for learning to continue virtually in the students' homes. She knew that open and frequent communication was important to both staff and families. This was the first attempt at virtual learning for all her staff members as well as the families in her school community. Mariam thought: "Is this a new era of schooling? And how do I effectively lead my school?"

The days turned into weeks, and virtual schooling became the new norm. *Synchronous learning* and *asynchronous learning* were added to everyone's vocabulary; schools and classrooms that were previously based on collaboration, discussions, dialogue, and face-to-face interaction transformed into ones based on individualized and virtual interactions. Mariam's leadership transitioned to never-ending emergency Zoom meetings, emails, phone calls, and regular virtual meetings. Everyone's personal and professional beliefs and boundaries were challenged. Mariam knew that support for her staff would be essential, so she assembled a support team. She approached three staff members who agreed to organize an initiative to support others. They organized virtual social events that boosted spirits, online yoga and meditation classes that helped with mental health and wellness, and a meet-to-share time where teachers discussed their new pedagogies for virtual teaching. These events seemed to facilitate positive relationships among staff members, even from a distance.

Union recommendations added another level of ambiguity. Some teachers created YouTube channels where they posted lessons for students to watch. Other teachers created packages for students to complete and submit when finished. Worksheets made a comeback, and communicative math teaching, which had recently been introduced, was put on hold. Teachers felt challenged, and emotions ran high as they dealt with these new protocols while supporting their own families and children. As the school leader, Mariam felt her role was to support everyone as much as possible by listening, offering encouragement, and stepping in when needed. Nonetheless, Mariam was constantly questioning her ability to lead in this time of crisis and could not shake the feeling that she should be doing more. Her mind often raced, and she wondered:

Am I failing my community? What are we doing? This is a pandemic, and we are expecting our teachers, our students, and our families to continue learning while the world is falling

apart? Why are we asking teachers to step into roles that have created 100 times more than the normal workload while they, too, are dealing with this pandemic? How is this possible? Have we lost sight of what is important: the care, love, and well-being of our communities and self?

Although Mariam felt increasing anxiety and worry every day, she hid it from everyone and pretended to be the pillar of strength and support that she felt her school community needed. She thought, "Wasn't this why I became a leader? To rise to the occasion when things were tough—not to shy away and be resilient." Although her resiliency was severely challenged, she noticed that she was practicing both adaptive[1] *and* servant leadership[2]: putting her school community first; being attentive to her school community's concerns; supporting them to develop their full personal capacities; empathizing with them; nurturing them; empowering them; and "leading in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large" (Northouse, 2019, p. 348). Mariam tried to be a good servant leader. She kept repeating to herself: "I am their pillar of strength and support. I will empower my staff and families and help them navigate the realities and challenges, regardless of the situation." However, the *learn from home* approach was taking its toll. One evening, after a long day of virtual meetings, Mariam sat in her living room reflecting, and she began to cry:

> I cannot take this anymore! How do I keep being the pillar of strength for everyone and dealing with these high-stress situations? Who is supporting me? And, if I hear the word "pivot" one more time, then I am going to scream! I have no more "pivot" left in me!

The virtual school year continued and ended. Everyone except Mariam felt a wave of relief on the last day of school in June 2020. She was not looking forward to what was to come, as she knew that the break meant a flurry of virtual discussions and meetings with her school board officials to reflect on the past few months and to "better" prepare for the new school year.

A New School Year: September 2020

The start of the new school year brought new challenges and the same uncertainty. The MOE mandated a full return for elementary students, a hybrid model for secondary students, and—to make matters more complicated—an option of full virtual learning for both elementary and secondary students. The role of education was questioned once again. Social media outlets were flooded with comments about whether schools should stay open or closed. Although people were scared, they needed to feel a sense of normalcy in their lives, and school routines could provide this. Mariam thought that even though mental health was a concern, the safety of staff and students must be pushed to the forefront. Mariam already felt physically, emotionally, and mentally drained, and it was only the beginning of a new school year.

Shortly after the September school opening, the mandates began. School boards, mandated by the MOE, asked all principals to create COVID-19 taskforces to collaborate and prepare for potential transitions back to school in person or online. Even though Mariam responded quickly, she knew that her staff and school community needed support and reassurance that the school was a safe place. That school year, she needed to lead differently: Being flexible was a top priority, and her leadership approach needed to be able to—as she dreaded—pivot. As soon as school protocols were in place, Public Health and the MOE changed them based on new information. Mariam took a step back, reflected on all the changes that had been put in place, and sighed:

> Our schools have become places of constant hand washing, sanitizing, cohorting, and physical/social distancing. Classes are separated outside during recess by spray-painted areas, equipment color-coded to the cohort, dots painted on the floor, and washroom breaks sched-

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[1] Adaptive leadership is "how leaders encourage people to adapt—to face and deal with problems, challenges, and changes…[it] focuses on the adaptations required of people in response to changing environments. Simply stated, adaptive leaders prepare and encourage people to deal with change" (Northouse, 2019, p. 393).

[2] Servant leadership "emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them. Servant leaders put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities" (Northouse, 2019, p. 348).

uled. Our schools are filled with policies and cleaning protocols in the name of safety. Is this school anymore? And are our students learning, or are they here in fear?

Before Mariam could answer her own questions, everything was about to change.

Getting Ready for the Pivot (Again)

As the school year went on, the COVID-19 pandemic became worse. As the provincial COVID-19 cases climbed, Mariam and her task force prepared for the inevitable—waiting for the *when* instead of wondering *if*. Mariam knew that the switch to virtual learning would be different this time. The focus would be not only on survival mode but also on academics. The classroom was once again moving into the virtual world, and she would need to help her staff to think and see their teaching practices differently.

Even though leading during and through a pandemic was challenging, Mariam knew that many positive things could be learned from the experience. What would the future of education be when the world was no longer living in survival mode? One of her biggest learning experiences was to question the role of education and how her leadership would evolve to deal with future crises. She frequently pondered the following questions: What does educating students really mean? Are there better alternatives to traditional schooling? Have we found them? What did I learn about myself and my leadership? There was no doubt in Mariam's mind that during the pandemic, mistakes were made, and some things could have been implemented and done better, but these types of critiques should be used for learning, unlearning, and relearning.

Teaching Notes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders were asked to constantly adapt and navigate many challenges to create positive outcomes for students, staff, and the school community. The pandemic increased challenges for school leaders who were already experiencing the high emotional toll of leading their school communities in contemporary times (Hauseman et al., 2020): new job demands, multiple uncertainties, and work intensification (Wang et al., 2018). Moreover, even in ideal circumstances, the principalship has been described as a complex, evolving, and multifaceted position (Fullan, 2014; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012), and many school leaders, such as Mariam, felt burdened by their responsibility to serve others and consistently place the needs of the school community above their own health and wellness (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Fein & Issacson, 2009). However, Mariam realized that the pandemic gave her an opportunity to reflect, learn, unlearn, and relearn her understanding of leadership and how to locate her leadership purpose within these new ways of thinking. This process left her with two key questions:

1. How is my work, my leadership, and my students' learning changing?
2. What lessons have I learned that will help me maintain resilience in future emergencies?

Based on these two key questions, we created two activities. The first activity, *developing leadership for times of crisis*, is designed to have participants reflect on and cross-reference past leadership practices. Participants are asked to devise a future action plan using a leadership framework created by Drysdale and Gurr (2017), which itself is based on scholarly research (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood & Sun, 2012) and research from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (e.g., Day & Gurr, 2014; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011). The second activity, *leading self*, is an extension of the seven domains of the leadership framework. It focuses on school leaders taking care of themselves and modeling this to their followers.

Activity 1: Developing Leadership for Times of Crisis

Mariam's feelings, in this case, are consistent with Hauseman et al.'s (2020) finding that:

> the impact of work intensification has been particularly evident in the following four aspects of school leaders' work: a heightened sense of accountability and responsibility to support staff and students; learning new policies and job demands under tight timelines; a need to engage in transparent and consistent communication with all members of the school commu-

nity; and modelling and promoting meaningful collaboration. (p. 72)

To help leaders develop the capacity and skill sets, they need to lead in times of crisis, it is important that they have a guiding framework. Gurr and Drysdale (2017, 2020) proposed seven domains of practice (with underlying capabilities) to help school leaders in periods of uncertainty. The domains are (a) understanding the context, (b) setting direction, (c) developing the organization, (d) developing people, e) improving teaching and learning, (f) influencing, (g) and leading self. For this activity, we suggest that leaders self-reflect and formulate an action plan based on the seven domains. This activity is consistent with Caldwell and Loader's (2010) approach: Although leaders are cognizant and respectful of the past and respond to the many challenges in the present, they must also be future-oriented. Being future-oriented requires knowing and articulating internal values, hopes and goals, analyzing trends, and visioning preferred futures.

A future-oriented leadership approach can help leaders navigate turbulent times, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. There is also an opportunity to learn from others who have dealt with emergencies and crises that have severely disrupted education. Gurr (2020) suggested taking a global perspective and learning from countries in the Global South that experience annual learning crises due to weather interruptions such as hurricane disasters, as well as war zone countries that have interrupted schooling for years. The following organizations provide many additional resources and may help leaders with action planning.

- The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is a global network of organizations that work to provide quality education in emergencies and post-crisis recovery efforts (https://inee.org).
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a global organization founded in 1942 during wartime to look for ways and means to rebuild the education systems once peace was restored. Since then, UNESCO has developed many educational projects and tools to ensure that every child and every citizen has access to quality education. UNESCO resources (including UNESCO, 2021) are available in English (https://www.unesco.org/en) and French (https://www.unesco.org/fr).

Below, Table 1 is titled, *The Seven Domains of the Leadership Framework Reflection and Action Plan*. The table includes the seven leadership domains, a brief overview of each, and two columns: One column is for participants to reflect on their thoughts and past practices, and the second column is for formulating an action plan to improve some of the focal points in each domain. Participants may want to individually complete the table and then form groups to share and discuss responses.

Table 1
The Seven Domains of the Leadership Framework Reflection and Action Plan

Domain	Main Points	Self-Reflection	Action Plan
1. Understanding the Context	• Making sense of ambiguous situations. • Deciding what is important. • Identifying what trends are fundamentally reshaping education. • Identifying known and unknowns in relation to self and others (such as the school community). • Impacting the school: disruptive innovations or context changes.		

Domain	Main Points	Self-Reflection	Action Plan
2. Setting Direction	• Finding courage to take strategic risks or challenge the status quo. • Balancing between seeking and avoiding risk. • Pushing the boundaries and reimagining the future in education. • Minimizing risk that might endanger our students' futures through increased wisdom and intelligence. • Making decisions based on available evidence, seeking new information, looking for unintended consequences, and having contingency plans to change direction if necessary. • Long-term planning to help identify opportunities and threats; testing decisions without making assumptions. • Forming a broader perspective with different points of view; supporting organizations to preserve options; providing a future orientation through envisioning a preferred future; and helping prepare for unforeseeable events.		
3. Developing the Organization	• Continuously developing and renewing policies, structures, processes, programs, and practices to facilitate the capacity of organizational members to be highly productive. • Integrating the internal and external environment forces in shaping culture. • Developing distributed patterns of leadership throughout the organization.		

Domain	Main Points	Self-Reflection	Action Plan
4. Developing People	• Developing the capabilities of talent management and capacity building. • Viewing capacity building as a significant factor in influencing school improvement. • Not seeing developing people as an "add-on" but as an integral feature that needs to be institutionalized into the permanent structure of the school.		
5. Improving Teaching and Learning	• Focusing on the core functions of schooling by shaping a pathway of academic success for all students and providing the circumstances and opportunities that help ensure success. • Improving product knowledge: understanding contemporary learning models and effective instructional strategies. • Using evidence-based evaluation and decision-making to challenge and question research-based evidence and decide what is trustworthy evidence that needs to be given consideration. • Understanding disruptive technology: technology is changing the way teachers teach, and students learn. • Recrafting approaches to accommodate new technologies.		

| Domain	Main Points	Self-Reflection	Action Plan
6. Influencing	• Influencing is everything a leader does—hearing from the leader, seeing the leader, and interacting with the leader. • Hearing from the Leader: honing their communication skills, clearly explaining the current situation and context and where to move and why—they need to act as sense-makers and storytellers. • Showing respect. • Seeing the leader: judging leaders on not only what they say, but on who they are and what they do. • Being a role model: a key aspect of influencing. • Interacting with the leader: a two-way process. While seeing and hearing from the leader tends to be one-way communication, influencing is also relational: listening, collaborating, socializing, and participating as it is about seeing and hearing. • Building productive relationships. • Establishing networks with various constituencies. • Building alliances and coalitions.		
7. Leading Self	• Being an effective leader of oneself. • Influencing oneself to establish self-direction and self-motivation. • Taking responsibility for self-development. • Reframing and opening our minds to new possibilities. • Questioning our assumptions.		

Activity 2: Leading Self
Establish Professional Boundaries and Model Wellness

At times, recommendations presented in leadership studies tend to focus on the organizational supports and/or provincial- and board-level policies that remedy the challenges associated with change (see Harris, 2005; Wang et al., 2018) in place of examining the internal actions principals can deploy. Neck and Manz (2010) have asserted that, for leaders to lead others effectively, they must first be effective leaders of themselves. This shifts educational actors' well-being, professional boundaries, and self-efficacy to the fore of leadership and administration research in the field (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). In particular, the changing nature of the principalship and increases in work intensification because of the COVID-19 pandemic have shed light on the internal challenges principals face while leading schools (Ontario Principals' Council, 2017; Pollock et al., 2014, 2017; Riley, 2019). Although discourse on work intensification and leading through uncertainty has identified theoretical remedies (see Pollock & Wang, 2019, 2020) for understanding the multifaceted role of the principal, the praxis of such remedies is still developing.

Mariam's case provides insight into the complexities of leading schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, which warrants a deeper examination of how professional boundaries, wellness, and professional learning can effectively contribute to leading oneself. For this activity, we suggest that participants establish a method of self-check-ins that enables them to review and reframe their leadership to account for changes (Gurr & Drysdale, 2017). The various characteristics of *Leading Self*, according to Gurr and Drysdale (2017), are outlined below in Figure 1. Participants can identify areas in which they are meeting work demands and those that need attention, while also offering moments of reflection for action planning. If three or more areas are identified as needing improvement, then this is an indicator that a participant's wellness is deficient, and it is time to act.

There is no shortage of available resources that focus on how to improve one's wellness. One of the latest is individualized and self-paced wellness mobile apps tailored to meet every wellness desire, from meditation to physical activity to tracking water intake. A Google search of "top wellness apps" provides the most popular ones to choose from (i.e., Calm, Headspace, etc.)

Figure 1
Leading Self
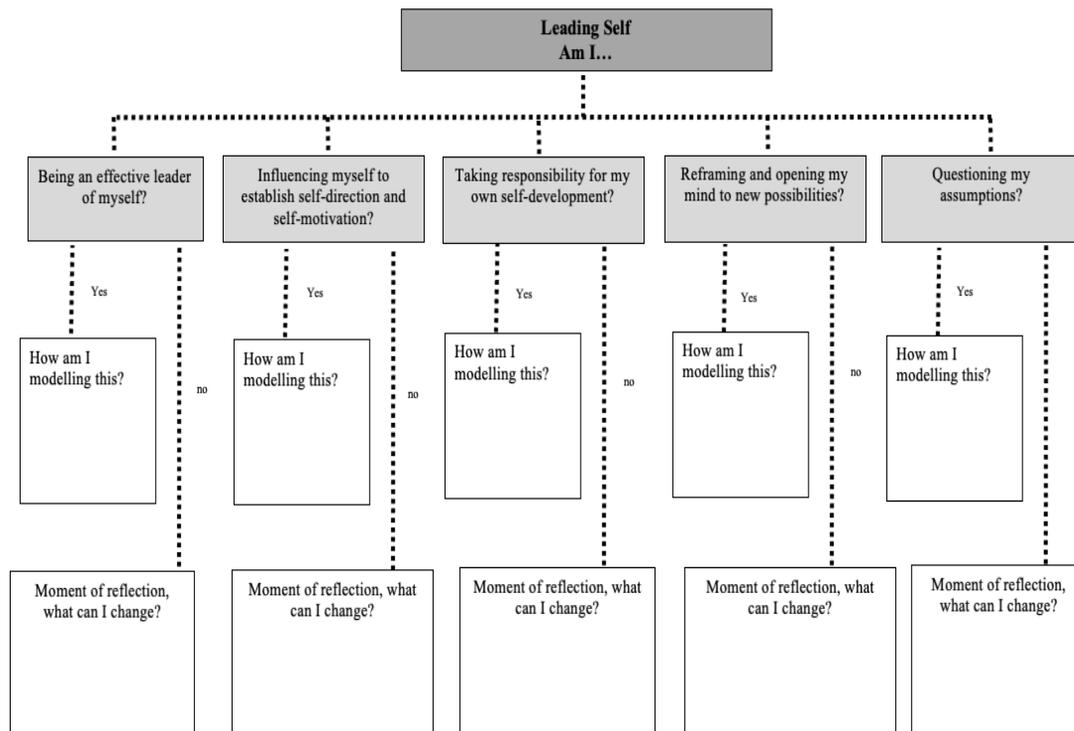
The Nature of Effective Professional Learning

Professional learning provides principals with the agency to proactively seek opportunities for self-development and access to networks for mentorship (Lashway, 2003) that both seasoned and novice principals can rely on while enacting their leadership and adapting to change (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017; Young et al., 2005). A key component to leading oneself is identifying when and how to change. Drysdale and Gurr (2017) posited that:

> In addition to being responsible for their own development, leaders in uncertain times need to be self-aware. To succeed in a changing world, leaders need to strive to adapt, know themselves, see how others see them and understand their impact on others. To achieve this, they need to be open to change and be prepared to question their own assumptions in the face of new evidence. (p. 150)

Considering their adaptability and questioning their own assumptions provides an opportunity for participants to assess the gaps in their professional learning that may help them lead themselves. To achieve this, we suggest that leaders refer to the activity presented above and identify professional learning gaps.

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