

Moral Leadership Under Sustained Threat: A Theoretically Grounded First-Person Account of Crisis Leadership in an International School

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Abstract

This paper presents a firstperson, theoretically grounded account of leading a large, academically elite international K–13 school through sustained civil conflict during the Bougainville crisis in Papua New Guinea. Drawing on contemporary educational leadership theory—including moral leadership, relational trust, adaptive leadership, traumainformed practice, and education in emergencies—the paper examines how leadership presence, radical transparency, relational care, and ethical contraction enabled the school to sustain academic excellence and human dignity amid prolonged instability. Over a twoyear period, enrolment declined from approximately 1,800 to 650 students, necessitating repeated restructuring and ethical decisionmaking under sustained threat. The paper contributes practitioner-scholar insight into best-practice leadership in fragile and conflict-affected educational contexts.

This story is also told through musical performance, with crafted song lyrics and musical production. The following link will take you to this part of the presentation.

<https://heyzine.com/flip-book/1fd91b3500.html>

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Moral Leadership, Crisis Leadership, Relational Trust, Adaptive Leadership, Education in Emergencies

MORAL LEADERSHIP UNDER SUSTAINED THREAT



PRESENCE AND VISIBILITY

Being calm and visibly engaged during uncertain times



TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST

Communicating honestly and building high levels of trust



CARE AND COMPASSION

Supporting staff and students through precarious circumstances

ADAPTATION AND INTEGRITY

Ethically adapting approaches as a conditions change



1. Theoretical Framing: Leadership in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts

Contemporary educational leadership theory increasingly recognises that schools operate within environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) rather than stability [3,13]. Leadership in such contexts cannot be understood through linear improvement or managerial effectiveness alone.

This account is explicitly informed by five intersecting theoretical lenses:

- i. **Moral and valuesbased leadership** [6,14]
- ii. **Relational trust and social capital** [15]
- iii. **Adaptive and distributed leadership** [5,16]
- iv. **Traumainformed and emotionally responsive schooling** [17]
- v. **Education in emergencies and protracted crisis** [10,18]

These frameworks collectively position leadership not as authority exercised over others, but as responsibility exercised *with* and *for* a community under stress.

2. Leadership Presence as Relational Trust-Building

Relational trust theory emphasises respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity as the foundations of organisational functioning [15]. In crisis contexts, trust is not accumulated through policy, but through **repeated relational interactions under pressure**.

My decision to walk the playground every day, to know students by name, and to engage directly with their learning aligns precisely with this framework. These practices enacted:

- **Personal regard:** students were seen as individuals
- **Competence:** learning remained a priority
- **Integrity:** leadership behaviour matched stated values

Trauma-informed educational models affirm that predictable adult presence and relational safety are primary stabilising mechanisms for children living amid threat [17].

What may appear informal is in fact consistent with best-practice relational leadership.

3. Radical Transparency as Ethical and Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership theory argues that in complex crises, leaders must resist the impulse to provide false certainty and instead help communities “stay with the problem” [5]. In educational contexts, this requires ethical transparency rather than reassurance.

My commitment to radical honesty—with staff, students, and governance—aligns with both adaptive leadership and moral leadership traditions [6,14]. Weekly, candid meetings with the board chair represented shared sensemaking, not hierarchical reporting.

Crisis leadership literature demonstrates that trust is sustained when uncertainty is named, losses are acknowledged, and decisionmaking principles are clearly articulated [8,13].

4. Care as Ethical Action: Servant and Moral Leadership in Practice

Servant leadership and moral leadership theories emphasise that leadership legitimacy derives from enacted concern for the wellbeing of others, particularly the most vulnerable [6,14,19].

The decisions to medically evacuate injured staff were not ancillary acts of kindness; they were **core leadership acts**. They signalled that:

- Staff were valued beyond their economic function
- The institution accepted moral responsibility, not merely contractual obligation
- Human dignity superseded expediency

Such actions align with empirical findings that moral consistency under pressure is foundational to organisational resilience [12,15].

5. Trauma-Informed Safety and Collective Agency

Current best practice in trauma-informed education recognises that preparedness and agency reduce fear more effectively than avoidance [17]. By engaging openly in safety drills addressing firearms, tear gas, and potential armed intrusion, the school enacted a **collective trauma-aware approach**.

This reflects Davies’ assertion that schools in conflict must prioritise agencybuilding rather than false normalcy [3], as well as

UNICEF guidance on psychosocial support in emergencies [10].

6. Community, Belonging, and Social Capital Under Threat

Educational leadership research increasingly recognises social capital as a protective factor during organisational stress [15,16]. Informal relational spaces—meals, shared rituals, friendship—are not peripheral but structurally significant.

The deliberate cultivation of gatherings, hospitality, and shared space aligns with theories of distributed leadership and social cohesion, where leadership is enacted through the enabling of relationships rather than control of processes [16].

7. Ethical Contraction and Adaptive Exit Leadership

Letting go of leadership authority when it is no longer ethically or structurally justified aligns with both adaptive leadership and moral stewardship [5,11]. Declaring my own role redundant was a practical enactment of ethical coherence.

Kotter argues that credible change leadership requires visible alignment between directive and personal sacrifice [11]. This action also reflects relational trust principles: leaders do not exempt themselves from the consequences imposed on others.

8. Legacy Leadership and Equity-Oriented Transition

Education in emergencies theory increasingly emphasises **legacy impact**, not merely survival [10,18]. The establishment of a locally accessible, internationally accredited pathway for students following site closure demonstrates leadership oriented beyond organisational self-preservation.

Partnering with an Australian university to train local teachers aligns with sustainable capacitybuilding models recognised in international education research [18]. This positioned the school’s contraction as a redistribution of opportunity rather than a withdrawal of care.

9. Reframing Success Through Contemporary Leadership Theory

From a contemporary theoretical perspective, success in crisis leadership is defined by:

- Preservation of relational trust [15]
- Maintenance of moral coherence [6,14]
- Adaptive restructuring without institutional trauma [5]
- Equity-oriented legacy building [10,18]

Measured against these criteria, the leadership enacted during this period aligns strongly with best practice under sustained threat.



Musical Link: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/1fd91b3500.html>

10. Conclusion

This account demonstrates that effective educational leadership in conflict-affected contexts is not improvised heroism but **the disciplined enactment of established leadership theory under extreme conditions**. Moral purpose, relational trust, adaptive responsiveness, and ethical humility were not philosophical ideals; they were operational necessities.

Under sustained threat, leadership is not about **holding power, but about holding people, purpose, and values steady long enough for others to endure**.

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