

## Surviving and Thriving in Hard Times

Robert Evans

As the economic crisis continues to unfold, school leaders are grappling not only with unprecedented financial uncertainty but with the anxiety it is causing in their school communities. The first is daunting enough, but the second presents challenges all its own. For most school heads these are uncharted waters. Independent schools have enjoyed 25 years of remarkable growth during which they have increased enrollments, raised tuition, expanded fundraising, built facilities, hired staff. In recent years concerns have spread about affordability, but not about viability. Now, however, heads everywhere are concerned about potential declines in applications and increases in financial aid requests, and about the fate of capital campaigns and construction projects. The current situation is, as everyone keeps saying, unbelievable.

Even as they try to grasp the full financial challenge, leaders have had to manage its impact on others, chiefly faculty but also parents. With teachers, this has often had a very personal dimension. Many veteran educators, watching their retirement nest eggs shrink, have sought out their head for advice about whether to sell their mutual funds, whether to delay their plans for retiring, and so on. Other teachers, particularly in schools that have struggled to stay full, have asked worriedly, “Will we have enough students next year?” And beneath these and other questions, many heads believe, lies a scary one that few teachers are verbalizing: “Will I have a job?”

Many heads also report an increase in parent anxiety, not about the school’s viability but about their child’s next admissions hurdle. Just when it seemed that parents couldn’t possibly be any more anxious about college or secondary school admission, the concern of many has ratcheted up further. For these parents, entrance to the next level has acquired a new urgency as the best

chance of guaranteeing a secure future in turbulent times. (“What if my son *only* gets into Vanderbilt?” one parent recently asked a head, leaving him incredulous.)

I have no financial crystal ball, but I have worked with public schools during severe financial cutbacks and with independent schools that have merged due to financial pressures. I have also worked with schools in many other sorts of crises—sudden deaths, suicides, the 9/11 attacks. These experiences have taught me that although there is no crisis leadership template, there are steps that can help sustain morale and support coping, that can be useful even in worst-case scenarios—and that can help leaders manage their own stress.

### Managing Anxiety: Three Keys

Franklin Roosevelt knew that anxiety is infectious, hence his famous, much quoted line, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Roosevelt was keenly aware of how easily anxiety can overwhelm rationality and how rapidly it can spread, especially when people feel they have no control over events. In such times people turn naturally to their leader and are calmed and encouraged when the leader acknowledges their concerns, projects energy and commitment about addressing the crisis, and levels with them. Roosevelt was a master at this. So, in their own ways, were Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln. School leaders don’t need to be Roosevelt, Churchill, or Lincoln, but they can make a real difference to their schools by acknowledging, projecting, and leveling.

Crisis coping begins with acknowledging people’s uncertainties and fears. Listening to teachers’ and parents’ concerns and communicating what you have heard is, all by itself, comforting. Listening begins with having an open door, inviting people who come with a question or concern to elaborate a bit, to say what

it is they are especially worried about, and so on. It may involve scheduling a specific meeting where teachers can ask questions and share concerns. It does not mean urging people to dwell on their worries or becoming the psychiatrist for the entire adult community. It does not mean having to have answers to all the questions. It means making sure people feel your interest and confirming for them that you have heard them.

Projecting energy and commitment involves conveying a staunch willingness to work the problem, to do one's best on behalf of the school. It may include reminding colleagues of past challenges the school has mastered (more on this below), of strengths you have always found in the school community. It does not mean being falsely confident or blandly reassuring, but people draw positive conclusions when the head's words and demeanor convey vigor and determination. So long as they perceive the leader as doing everything possible to overcome a challenge they have reason to be hopeful.

One of the best ways to alleviate anxiety is to level with people. Even in a worst-case scenario, when the news is terrible and the leader cannot avert the crisis, people still feel better when the leader is straight with them. There is no point in telling people more than they need to know or can absorb (intricate financial details, say, or a list of all the possible bad permutations that could occur). Information alone will not alleviate all fears, in good part because anxiety interferes with concentration and therefore memory—when we're most anxious we don't process information clearly. And it is wise to avoid speculating about potential difficulties. But communicating facts and telling people the basic truth are necessary. It reinforces their trust and therefore their sense of connectedness and of being cared for. It helps them keep doing their own best.

These three aspects of managing anxiety were beautifully illustrated years ago by a gifted school superintendent when a major tax cut required draconian staff reductions. Once convinced there was no other option, he called an urgent district-

wide staff meeting. "I have terrible news," he said. "I have to propose to the school board tonight a budget I would never choose to offer. It contains real loss and pain. I wanted you all to be the first to know. I'm going to outline the essentials, tell you what I hope we can salvage, how I plan to proceed, and then I'll be glad to answer your questions." Later, one of his elementary principals told me, "We didn't know whether to cry or clap. The news was just awful, but he was so caring, so clear that he would keep doing everything he could, and so direct and honest—it was amazing."

### **A Worst Case: Making Cuts**

For every school leader, as for this superintendent, having to cut staff is a worst case scenario. It's something few school heads have had to do because of the long period of growth. Of course, most heads have occasionally not-renewed the contract of a low-performing teacher, sometimes in dramatic circumstances, but in my experience most dislike and delay doing so. They don't want to cause pain, face an unpleasant confrontation, and endure the anxiety and anger of the "victim's" colleagues. But even those who have been more assertive in this regard may blanch at the prospect of layoffs, like the head who told me, "Letting a poor performer go is painful but it's right. Doing that to someone who doesn't deserve it? It's like evicting them from their home."

Literally. As I have written in this magazine before, educators differ from those who select corporate careers. Teaching attracts people with both a strong service ethic and a strong security orientation, not worldly wise, financially driven entrepreneurs with a thirst for risk. Its chief rewards are intrinsic, not extrinsic, and it is the only field that offers tenure (even if this is just implicit in independent schools). Teachers trade salary for stability. They tend to look for a school that is a good home and to stay there. Their job—their calling—is especially meaningful to them; eviction deprives them of much more than income.

Becoming a head of school inevitably requires one to develop at least some tolerance for conflict and for making unpopular decisions, but most educators, including those who become administrators, are born pleasers and conflict-avoiders. They like people and they like to be liked. They tend to feel guilty if they upset or disappoint others. This inclines many heads to avoid delivering bad news and then to minimize and sugarcoat that news when they have to deliver it. Unfortunately, doing so often makes the situation worse, not better. There is no single script to follow, but here are six guidelines that can be helpful:

1. *Be straight.* Don't beat around the bush. Convey the news simply and directly. Emphasize (it it's true) how sorry you are, that you've made this decision because you had to, not because you wanted to. Confirm that you value the teacher's work and collegiality, that you'll do whatever you can to help her find a position.
2. *Don't try to minimize the loss.* Don't, for example, offer vague assurances ("I'm sure you'll find a spot in another school"). The intent may be to soften the blow (and reduce the teacher's anger at you), but it can come across as demeaning. Let the person be upset. He not only has a right to be upset, he *ought* to be. Listen, sympathize, repeat your regret.
3. *Don't leap to your own defense.* Staff may understand that positions must be cut but fail to see why the ax should fall on them. When someone asks, "Why me?" there is often little you can say. It's cold comfort to reply, "You're a good English teacher, but the others are better." Sometimes it's best to respond, "I know this must seem unfair as well as hard, and I'm not sure anything I can say will make you feel better."
4. *Don't raise false hopes.* Don't speculate that the position may be reinstated the following year or that a maternity leave might be announced which could create an opening—unless you're confident about

these possibilities. Doing so delays the need for the teacher to face the reality.

5. *Attend to the shame.* Being selected for eviction is humiliating, no matter what the circumstances. Talk with the teacher about how best to share the news with the rest of the school (you don't have to agree to do it his way, but all of us feel better with some measure of control over such a situation). Even if it's then awkward to be in his presence for the balance of the school year, don't magnify his shame by avoiding or ignoring him.
6. *Don't imagine there's an easy way out.* No matter how much skill you apply and how much sympathy and sensitivity you offer, you should expect to encounter strong emotion, complaints about the process that led to your decision, and a failure of information to assuage grief. These are thoroughly normal responses—indeed, the very same ones heads themselves experience when they are let go. They must be endured.

### **Take Perspective, Get Support**

With luck, the financial crisis will be shallower and shorter than we fear and will not require widespread staff reductions. But at this writing there seems little doubt that many heads are going to have to help their schools manage hardship in one form or another. If so, the guidelines above, appropriately adapted, are likely to be helpful. But whatever heads face and however they respond, they will benefit from taking perspective and getting support.

Perspective first. Virtually every crisis brings danger and opportunity. The danger is usually obvious. The opportunity is often hard to see at first, but it is almost always there, not least in the potential it provides for learning and growth. Most adults—and most schools—over the age of thirty have endured some kind of crisis in the not too distant past. And just as most people can look back at that crisis and identify something it taught them about themselves or about the world, so can most schools. In hard times it is good to remind

ourselves of our strengths, including the lessons we've learned from hard times past. We may need to abandon old skills and strengths and develop new ones, but remembering how we coped is a good—and heartening—place to begin.

Finally, heads will benefit if they don't try cope in heroic isolation. Nothing exacerbates stress like being alone. Research confirms that under stress, we don't just feel better when we have support, we think better. To sustain their best problem-solving heads need someone they can turn to for reality checks and troubleshooting, for worrying and encouragement—someone who can provide for them the very things they provide for their teachers and parents. This can come from being in touch with one another, sharing burdens and successes peer to peer. It can come through NAIS, which offers ways for heads to connect online through listservs and through President Patrick Bassett's blog. Some heads can confide in their board chair. In hard times seeking support is a necessity, not a luxury, a sign of strength, not weakness. I can think of no better way for heads to help their schools survive and ultimately thrive.

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This article will appear in *Independent School*, Summer, 2009 (and will be posted on the [nais.org](http://nais.org) web site before Thanksgiving). Rob Evans is the the author of *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with The Crisis in Childrearing*, and *The Human Side of School Change*. He can be reached at [ww.robevens.org](http://ww.robevens.org).