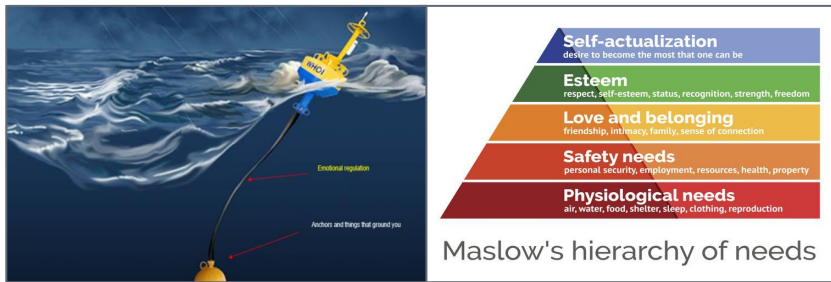


Australian school principals & COVID 19

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 also 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 you to navigate the demands of your professional roles, alongside your personal concerns and struggles.

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

VUCA Leadership

VUCA is a military acronym that has now evolved into leadership practice. In its expanded form, each letter expresses an important element for managing and leading. The elements of this acronym are: **V**olatile, **U**ncertain, **C**omplex, and **A**mbiguous. 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 antidote to VUCA environments as the descriptors below.

- Vision** – leaders need the ability to see through the chaos and 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 whilst 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 whilst avoiding criticism and risk-taking.
- Adaptability** – If ever there was 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 the strategic course.

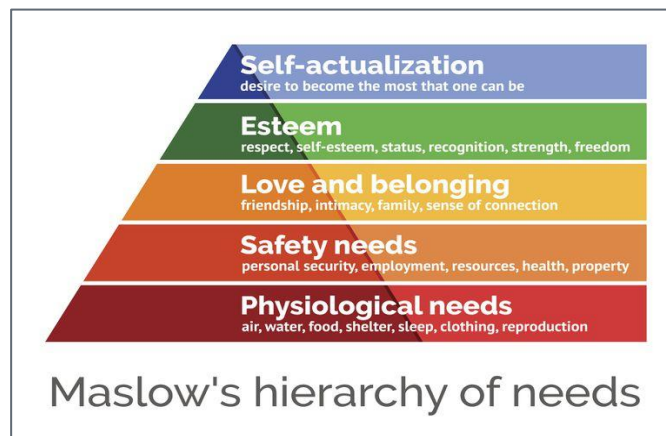
Helpful ways to reframe unhelpful thoughts:

“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 doing my best.”

Threat to safety and dysregulation



Most principals would be aware of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a motivational theory in the psychology of humans needs. One of the highest priorities is the need for safety. Right now many people feel like their safety is compromised. The most important and critical point for us all right now is to find a safe and stable space.

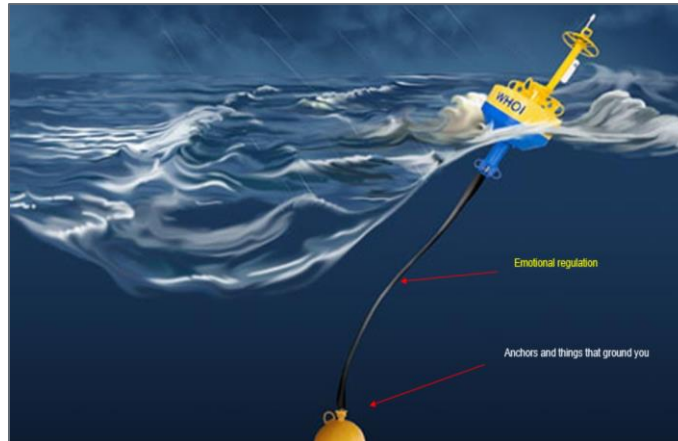
People want to experience order, predictability and control in their lives. All of us require emotional security, financial security, social stability as well as the stability of health and wellbeing in order to function and perform at a very basic level. These needs can be fulfilled by a range of things; predictable and habitual routine every day, family and relationships along with 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 physical distancing and isolation destabilises our central nervous system, our emotional regulation, our cognitive processing and our ability to cope.

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

People who feel safe and regulated are more open, aware of self and others, clearer in their thoughts able to be kind, caring and generous, able to function and order thinking, and are more productive. By understanding this, it becomes evident that we need to 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 a lowered threshold of being able to cope and manage. This might manifest in anger that quickly arises, extreme emotions that wash over and through us, or the inability to manage things that were previously manageable. We often feel like we have to avoid distress, as opposed to leaning into it flexibly and allowing it to pass, much like a buoy tethered to an anchor.

It is vital that you're aware of your own lowered tolerance in order to manage it. If you are finding yourself being swept away with emotions more than 3-5 times a day then you have a mid-low level of coping. If this happens 5-10 times a day, then you have a very low capacity to cope and it is important that you put some strategies in place. It's good to use a simple 1-10 scale of stress and distress. If you are feeling 5-8 on the distress scale, employing strategies for yourself translates to agency in your personal self-care. If you are feeling 8, 9, or 10 on the distress scale, this indicates that you are in absolute need of support from others and you may also consider seeking professional-help.

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

It can be helpful to have a selection of grounding activities and strategies. For example; physical exercise, mindfulness, family, gardening, deep breathing and making tea. It is best to have a variety of exercises that you can draw upon at different times. Just like different techniques work for different 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 as a simple grounding exercise:

Working backward from 5, use your senses to list things you notice around you. For example, start by listing five things you hear, then four things you see, then three things you can touch from where you're sitting, next two things you can smell and finally one thing you can taste. Notice a change in how you feel after the exercise compared with before.

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 your personal over-exposure to the media or news. Support the provision of only factual information. Be mindful of exposure to information through stories, print media, tv, radio, and social media. It may be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.
- Check-in regularly about things you may have heard, seen or feelings you have experienced.
- Avoid catastrophizing and ensure your behaviour and reactions aren't elevating your staff or community's reaction. Speak calmly and stay grounded to allow people around you 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.
- 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 feelings to an extraordinary event.
- Do things that make you feel safe, both physically and emotionally
- Create an honest open line of communication. Know that it is okay to show vulnerability and express that you don't have all the answers if you don't.
- Engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and the feeling of being grounded. (Use of alcohol and other drugs might be counterproductive).
- Maintain a healthy headspace by including good sleep hygiene, physical exercise, a balanced diet, mindfulness practice of noticing your own signs of stress and feelings of overwhelm in addition to talking to others.
- Contact the support lines and services for adults, if you feel overwhelmed
- Be self-compassionate – everyone is finding it hard to operate at an optimum level of functioning 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 a 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**