

TRUST AND HOPE AS A MANAGEMENT APPROACH DURING TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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Abstract

The leadership team of an international school decided to recall staff members to China during the early stages of a pandemic. This study begins with a literature review of some of the overarching concepts of psychodynamics while applying this methodology to the analysis of a critical incident. The emotional effects that contradictory messages on behalf of the school leadership team had on the faculty are theorised by looking at the correlation between stress and anxiety felt by teachers experiencing higher levels of scrutiny at the time of the transition to e-learning. An alternative management strategy for school leaders is put forward based on Mishra's Theory of Trust (1996) to encourage collaborative autonomy in schools during periods of great uncertainty.

Keywords: psychodynamics, crisis, anxiety, stress, leadership, trust, hope, collaborative autonomy

Introduction

Teaching is a profession that causes great levels of stress and anxiety and often leads to burnout even under normal circumstances (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978; Kyriacou, 1987). Educators are familiar with heavy workloads, complex work relationships, excessive bureaucracy, an eroding professional status, and a constant need for emotional labour unique to the profession (Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012, p. 196) though rarely taken into account by school leaders and policymakers.

This is no less the case during a pandemic when most educators around the globe were quite suddenly instructed to provide lessons through online platforms. This unprecedented migration to e-learning created several challenges for teachers, lacking not only the technical and pedagogical training necessary to deliver high-quality lessons but also the coping mechanisms required to handle a barrage of negative emotions and feelings, with stress chief amongst these (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020, p. 2). The working hypothesis guiding this study is that during periods of great uncertainty, such as a pandemic, an overreliance on traditional management approaches and responsive models of leadership can prove ineffective and produce undesirable emotional outcomes (Dale & James, 2013, p. 93). An alternative framework is put forward, finding purchase on trust (Mishra, 1996) as a management approach to foster hope and lead to collaborative autonomy. When empowered with more say on pedagogical choices, teachers are more likely to manage negative emotions while also exhibiting and maintaining higher levels of professionalism and greater levels of collaborative autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 42).

A causal relationship between stress, work satisfaction, and professionalism is widely accepted among clinicians, meaning that leaders should place greater importance on the building of a positive environment that can foster collaborative autonomy to help alleviate negative emotions and

tension within an organisation. Hope can be the means to achieve such an outcome. This is perhaps even more prescient during a pandemic as there is an undeniable link between autonomy and teacher motivation which also interfaces with student outcomes (Khmelkov, 2000, Losos, 2000, White, 1992 as cited in Pearson & Moowaw, 2005). As for the role that hope plays within psychoanalysis, it is a much-debated one. Some scholars within the Freudian school of thought reduce the construct to an illusion or simple wish-fulfillment or *Wunscherfüllung* (Groarke, 2018, p. 365) or as another obstacle for the psychoanalyst to demystify and *cure*. However, such a perspective overlooks the constructive aspect of hope that translates into a wistful state of waiting for an envisioned future. Later in the study, I draw from the works of Melanie Klein (1946) and Steven Groake (2018) to expand on an alternative interpretation of hope.

Managing emotions is an important test for the leaders of an organisation. Competent leaders strike a balance, fostering trust among their followers while avoiding a scenario of complete lack of monitoring whereby employees become complacent and shirk from the primary task of the organisation (Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006, p. 1006). Trust and hope act as vehicles to collaborative autonomy, a term that is somewhat paradoxical in nature and not to be mistaken for the separated classrooms we find in most schools, nor the lack of scheduled common time and the “live-and-let-live” mantra that many educators uphold on account of fears of losing their independence (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 302).

This study brings to light a more recent definition of the term that includes collaborative decision-making and the freedom to make prescriptive professional choices (Pearson & Moonwaw, 2005). Studies such as that of Vangrieken et al. (2017) provide evidence that collaborative autonomy leads to better acceptance of innovation in schools, better performance by teachers, and thus better student outcomes all of which are essential to schools during a time of transition to e-learning. We begin by employing a

framework of trust to analyse a critical incident involving an international school as well as the decisions taken by the senior leadership team (SLT) during the early stages of the pandemic, as well as the emotional effects on the faculty members. The sources of data used for this study were summaries of online correspondence and conversations as well as school documents that are publicly available online. A psychodynamic methodological approach is appropriate to carry out such an analysis as this study deals in emotions, and their effects on the performance of individuals. Where measurement-oriented approaches often fail to consider the person's interior phenomenological life, psychodynamics possesses the ability to explain the primitive domain of the unconscious and the resolution of internal conflicts (Taylor, 2009, p. 12).

Early authors such as Freud (1923) or Le Bon (1895) agree that unconscious processes are often more relevant than conscious processes in determining the actions of any given individual, especially when operating within group settings. Another important consideration is the stripping of individuals' identity when belonging to a group which according to Freud (1923) stirs up instinctive reflexes, or defences including denial, projection, and others and their role in stifling meaningful change, are best uncovered via psychoanalytical approaches (p. 33). In the subsequent section, the main terminology used throughout this study will be explained.

Terminology

Wilfred Bion's Basic-Assumption Group and Narcissistic Leadership.

In *Experiences in Groups*, Wilfred Bion (1961) refers to Freud's failure in acknowledging the importance of observing the individual within a group but also clarifies that all of us are intrinsically a part of a group whether willingly or unwillingly (p. 134). The author postulates how fundamental it is for psychoanalysts to study the individual and the development of personality within group settings as opposed to studying personality devel-

opment in isolation. The book identifies different kinds of groups and goes into detail on some of their idiosyncrasies within organisations providing definitions and examples of pairing groups, workgroups, specialised workgroups (for instance the Church or the Army) as well as basic assumption groups; the last of which will be of particular interest to this study as the school featured in the critical incident falls under this category.

Basic assumption groups often experience an inversion of roles, whereby a selected group of loyal subordinates with a direct avenue to the leader withhold or gloss over information. This originates from a narcissistic leadership model which often fuels basic assumption groups; leaders often become trapped in their own delusions of grandeur and omnipotence (Zaleznik, 1989; Schwartz, 1990; Hirschhorn, as cited in Gabriel, 1991). Another example that points to a basic-assumption state is the scarce examples of collaboration and poor organisation plaguing the institution; (Bion, 1961, p. 136) This was particularly evident in the early stages of the transition to e-learning. There is also the tendency of the basic assumption group to disregard the welfare of its members prioritising the survival of the group at all costs (even at the cost of reality). This basic assumption took form when the school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) handling of the crisis during the early stages of the pandemic and will be analysed in more depth at a later stage.

According to Freud (as cited in Taylor, 2009) narcissism is a kind of self-infatuation that stems from one's obsession with their own sexual organs and is a common characteristic of "schizophrenics who have withdrawn from reality" (p. 63). Other definitions have been offered by researchers that looked at narcissistic personalities from a psychodynamic lens including Kohut and Jung although all these authors all seem to agree that denial of reality is a common feature of the narcissist. Every leader possesses narcissistic desires and motivations as there is a balance that must be reached. The signs of narcissistic leadership include the inversion of the primary

task of the organization where protecting the leader from reality overtakes the primary task itself (Gabriel, 1999).

A clear sign of narcissistic leadership within the school was the way both the principal and vice-principal often seemed caught off guard during whole-staff meetings when questions regarding the poor technical support provided to teachers during the e-learning phase were put forward, or when the many obstacles to those who were trying to head back to China at the outset of the pandemic were raised. There are also numerous cases of contradicting information being provided and a lack of creative solutions to the many issues that were also evident throughout that period time. This will be readdressed in more detail under section *the Case*.

The narcissistic approach to leadership in this organisation did not begin with this fresh crisis, but its detrimental effects were only exacerbated by the pandemic. In many cases, communication between the SLT and the faculty members was absent or became distorted as shown by the contradictory emails sent by the principal and vice principal. This often results from the transference of frustration, anxiety, and stress that have gone, originating from a search for self-idealisation within the organisation itself. Such a *dead-end* is defined as a paranoid-schizoid projective system that can cripple an organization (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994, p. 14) and stifle cooperation and collaboration thus giving way to self-preservation.

Transference, Introjection, Projection, Splitting, Denial, and Avoidance

Extensive reading on psychodynamics shows that there is little consensus regarding the definitions of transference, introjection, projection, and splitting; these unconscious processes have definitions that have evolved significantly over time. Introjection, for instance, was initially described as the process of absorbing positive experiences into one's own self, while projection was once labelled as the process of wishing bad experiences away (De Board, 1978, p. 14). In the context of this study, a more holistic

and modern definition is proposed. Introjection stands as the process of incorporating someone else's feelings into ourselves as if they were our own, and projection is the locating of one's feelings onto someone else (Dale & James, 2015, p. 12). These processes are essential mechanisms of personality-building, studied in the field of psychodynamics to explain group and organisational behaviour while also exceptionally relevant to measure the efficacy of leadership approaches.

One of Freud's contemporaries, Melanie Klein, identified a fourth phenomenon after decades studying toddlers: splitting which first takes place during the child's interaction with the mother's breast (De Board, 1978, p. 26). Splitting consists of the categorising of different emotions into *good* and *bad* (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994, p. 13). This process is of particular interest within organisational settings during periods of change/crisis as employees tend to use splitting as an instinctive response to new expectations placed upon them. Denial and avoidance are both common characteristics of a basic assumption group (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). In such groups, leaders focus on trivial matters and prefer quick solutions that require minimal effort. A basic assumption group is also one where employees are often demoralised and doubtful of their own agency and ability to enact change (p. 43). The aforementioned processes can be interpreted as pain avoidance/deflection strategies used in our daily lives. Throughout the critical incident, there will be examples of such strategies being put into place by both the faculty and SLT.

Stress, Anxiety, and Fear

Stress is a "psychological reaction to certain factors perceived as threats to one's wellbeing" (Lazarus 1996; 2006 as cited in MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020, p. 2). A sample of over 600 language teachers working in different points of the globe took an online survey during the outset of the pandemic, in April 2020. The resulting data reveal an alarming increase

in work-related stress; below are the primary triggers of stress (stressors) measured as part of the study:

- Difficulty in balancing one's personal life with professional requirements as teaching from home means less defined barriers between work and home life.
- Scarcity of time with significant others and dependents; longer working hours—which in the case of international teachers was exacerbated by teaching students living in different time zones.
- Uncertainty regarding existing and future job postings— international teachers stand here also as a particularly disadvantaged group because of the absence of certain entitlements such as unemployment benefits and few legal defences against layoff or furlough.
- Adding to these, we have the nonspecific stressors that any given individual experiences during long periods of lockdown, for example *cabin fever*.

Uncertain times tend to lead to negative emotions, including anxiety and fear. As relates to the former, the definition provided by Dale and James (2015) seems most appropriate, defining anxiety as “a response to an internal and unknown threat” (p. 95). The authors contrast anxiety with fear, labelling the latter emotion as a “response to a known and external danger.” Failing to recognise the adaptative attributes that even seemingly negative emotions such as anxiety and fear can have by alerting individuals to potential dangers and spurring them into taking action (Reeve, 2015 as cited in MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020, p. 6). Within the context of this study, the adaptative nature of these two negative emotions is to be defined as self-preservation (Freud, 1923). A response that can prove beneficial to the individual but often detrimental to the organisation. When acting out of instinct to ensure one's survival, the employee is very unlikely

to collaborate and prioritise the broader interests of the organisation.

Trust, Hope, and Collaborative Autonomy

Trust is widely accepted as a synonym of vulnerability, or “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712 as cited in Mishra, 1996, p. 220). The concept has also been defined as holding “positive expectations regarding another's conduct” (Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006, p. 442)

From an organisational standpoint, trust can be looked at from four different dimensions: competence, openness, concern, and reliability (Mishra, 1996, p. 1). All the aforementioned authors acknowledge the beneficial effects of trust on collaboration and employee performance either explicitly or tacitly. The premise of this study is that trust is essential for any sustainable form of collaboration to take place and thus for the normal functioning of the organisation itself. In the context of this critical incident, we seek to illustrate how examples of mismanagement from the school leadership encouraged feelings of distrust and betrayal. The intention is not to critique for the sake of critiquing but to highlight how decisions born of a reactionary approach to leadership can stifle trust and exacerbate adversity felt by individuals during times of great uncertainty.

Bion (1961) defined hope as a *Messianic* and naïve emotion often appearing in *pairing* groups (p. 151), going on to say that hope is the expectation of a leader arriving to place the fears and anxieties of the group at rest (as cited in De Board, 1978, p. 40). This definition reduces hope to an idealistic state, a feeling that undoubtedly ends up in disappointment and disenchantment. When a leader finally emerges within the organisation, the enormity of the expectations placed upon their shoulders might prove too much to bear.

This postulation is not new, as Freud (1923,) also referred to the *supernatural power* which *illusions* and *phantasies* have over a group (p. 16). Freud (1923) is referring to a kind of collective obsessional neurosis, meaning that the group itself cannot last long without said illusions. Although this interpretation holds merit in the context of this organisation, mapping out how school leaders may attempt to deny or evade the difficult prospects brought by an unforeseen catastrophic event such as a pandemic is based on the assumption that all hope is utopian, which is not always the case.

Klein (1946) suggests a broader definition of hope, defining the term as an emotion led by the super-ego and driven from an inward desire to “repair or regain something that was lost” (p. 20) This definition is more suitable to become a management approach as it makes it incumbent on managers to trust their subordinates in times of great anxiety, thus making it easier to cope with anxiety and fear. Such a *healing* definition of hope holds greater merit. There is ample evidence that teachers who are trusted to make their own pedagogical choices are less likely to withdraw into a state of self-preservation and instead experience hope even during times of great uncertainty. From an organisational perspective, hope acts as a vehicle to a concept that Pearson and Moowaw (2005) labelled as collaborative autonomy.

Incidentally, hope is scarcely mentioned within the context of psychodynamics (Groarke, 2018, p. 366) and when it does get mentioned, authors tend to reduce the construct to wish-fulfilment (Freud, 1923) or mistake it for the act of *narcissistic waiting*, a hasty and common misconception as more can be said of the psychodynamics of hope and its merit to organisational theory. The construct of hope can be interpreted as a commitment to the value of the future, a pledge to wait for an envisioned future. Waiting thus opens the possibility of the impossible in terms of “a gift that cannot make itself (a) present [un don qui ne peut pas se faire pré’sent]” (Derrida, 1992a, p. 29 as cited in Groarke, 2018, p. 368). Everything has to begin

again, as if for the first time, on the primordial grounds of love and hope. As such, the new beginning operates at the interface of primary love and infinite hope – that is, according to “the measureless measure [mesure sans mesure] of the impossible” (Derrida, 1968, p. 29 as cited in Groarke, 2018, p. 368).

Autonomy can be born of hope although it is a construct that also invites different interpretations. Some researchers denounce it as a way for leaders to shirk responsibility as opposed to delegate authority. Within the context of this study, autonomy stands as the opposite of self-preservation, a process leading the individual to reflect on the needs of the entire community as opposed to simply their own. Further research is warranted on autonomy especially on how collaborative autonomy manifests within educational/school settings. This is likely because it is a difficult construct to operationalise and measure autonomy although there seems to be a consensus that this is one of the keys to enact valuable education reform and improve teacher motivation (Erpelding, 1999; Jones, 2000; Wilson, 1993 as cited in Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 37).

Successful Examples of Trust as a Management Approach Across Other Fields

Trust is a broad concept that is difficult to be measured and with an ever-changing definition. Within organisational settings, Radomska et al. (2019) defined trust as “an alternative mechanism for controlling collective organizational activities, especially in environments with a growing level of uncertainty and complexity” (p. 2). In that study, the authors analysed and compare ten companies across Portugal and Poland using a mixed-method approach, including a large number of interviews, concluding that organisations operating with lower levels of trust often burden the company leader and senior employees with more accountability which has obvious, negative effects on mental health and the overall working atmo-

sphere of the organisation (p. 16). Trust can also be used by leaders to help their organisations change and adapt their business models and create new partnerships in an ever more globalised world. By intersecting a framework of collaboration with trust, Belkadi et al. (2017) propose a suite of collaborative approaches to manufacturing enterprises and provide evidence that through such a process, even small organisations in the field are able to innovate and stay afloat in a very competitive market (p. 1038).

The Case

Context- The school and its faculty

The international school which was the object of this study is located in Shanghai. It markets itself as one of the leading international schools in China, offering bilingual education in Chinese and English to students ranging from ages two to eighteen. The student population is around four hundred students, primarily from an East Asian ethnic background. Forty international teachers work at the Secondary Campus of primarily Chinese, British, Canadian, American, and Australian backgrounds, but also a small minority of European and Indian teachers. At the time of the original Covid-19 outbreak in China, one third of the teaching staff had been at the school for over fifteen years. Among this group of seasoned teachers, there was a strong perception that the organisation was gradually becoming more profit-driven despite continuing to promote itself as a nonprofit foundation.

This state of prolonged discontentment can be attributed to the teachers' lack of awareness of their own agency to enact change while also raising important questions about a possible loss of the organisation's primary task and would help explain the declining number of student enrollment and high turnover in the leadership team. Such a possibility deserves a rigorous, separate study, although it is also an essential consideration to provide context for many of the controversial decisions taken during that period. The prevalence of economic motives for the school was evident in the poor

condition of the secondary campus, which was lacking in logistical and technological resources (poor Wi-Fi connection, dated, and faulty desktops, old projectors and printers dating back to over fifteen years). Such poor infrastructure was not only confined to the classrooms, but also the building itself (infiltrations, no heating in many classrooms, insufficient lockers, and no changing rooms provided). Establishing the organisation's priorities before the critical incident is crucial; it will help contextualise some of the decisions taken during the lockdown period and immediately after the school's reopening.

Context- Timeline

There is generalised agreement that the Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges to schools in China, be they state, public, domestic, or international. This school was no different. During the first weeks of lockdown in Shanghai during the Spring of 2020, the school leadership team found itself in a difficult position as close to half of the international teaching staff were scattered around the globe with progressively harder prospects of returning. The Chinese authorities decided to close the country's borders to all foreign passport holders on March 26th, which only made matters worse concerning the school's staffing prospects (Palmer, 2020). The data collection for this study was conducted via the examining of messages from social media forums where teachers shared their views, student feedback surveys, and emails sent by the leadership team. Their consent was provided, and their identities will not be disclosed at any point of the study. The critical incident spans from late January to March 2020—the month when the lockdown restrictions were lifted in Shanghai, and the school was allowed to reopen all its campuses.

Methodology

A healing, restorative nature drives the field of psychodynamics; Psychoanalysts are expected to analyse complex problems deeply rooted in the unconscious by looking at an organisation through the lens of truthfulness and honesty (Gabriel, 1999, p. 232). They also preoccupy themselves with the multitudinal concept of personality, postulating that it is controlled mainly by a vast interior, and the more primitive, unconscious domain. Through psychodynamics, researchers can better track fluctuations in personality based on the resolution of unconscious conflicts and better grasp the evolution of organisations and individuals operating within them (Taylor, 2009, p. 12). In the post-Covid-19 world, the boundaries between one's professional and personal life became blurrier than ever before. It is, therefore, appropriate to choose a psychodynamic approach when analysing the effects of managerial decisions in this modern context.

Psychoanalysts defend that human behaviour largely results from unconscious elements such as the battle between the ego and the superego. As a result, the same action from any given individual can be subject to multiple interpretations. The same can be said of organisations, standing as more than simple collective systems of action communication, hierarchy, and economic goals, but as products of one's idiosyncratic, daily experiences, and character (p. 66). Different individuals experience and perceive institutions in different ways. In this context, psychodynamics is a powerful instrument that sheds light on the human nature of organisations, driven by unconscious concepts that are very much still taboo in organisational studies, including the roles that sexuality, social dysfunctions, symbolism, and aesthetics play in the construction of the self.

Ontological Considerations

As a member of the school at the time of this critical incident, it is important to recognise that our perspective might be skewed. Much like our colleagues, we experienced the same anxieties and exhibited some of the same instinctive defences that come during times of great uncertainty. Some might argue that a researcher from outside the organisation would be a more suitable candidate to conduct psychoanalytic research as the observations produced would potentially prove more transparent and less affected by one's anxieties and assumptions.

Though as researchers, we can strive for self-disclosure, reflect on our own biases, anxieties, and fears while acknowledging the immensely complex challenge that the early stages of the pandemic posed for the school administrators and faculty. Navigating through a largely unforeseen event left the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with little to no room for planning and required quick and effective responses. We seek principally to provide one possible alternative or lens to look at this particular critical incident. However, it is not our conviction that a purely psychoanalytical approach could have warranted a different outcome. Neither is our goal to engage in *character assassination* and indict a given individual or group of individuals. The premise of this study is to question whether traditional management responses to crises are effective during a pandemic.

The works of the Tavistock clinical school (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994) showed us that to enact meaningful change at an organisational level, psychoanalysis should be applied in conjunction with social analysis. Researchers must also not disregard imperatives such as systemic elements that affect the individual's experiences within the organisation including racism, chauvinism, homophobia, and other pervasive factors and the role these play in conditioning organisational outcomes and the behaviour of employees.

The Approach of the Senior Leadership Team to the Pandemic

Even before the beginning of the pandemic, the school was experiencing a crisis related to the high turnover of leaders across half a decade. The former principal, on many accounts popular amongst Western staff members, had a short tenure of only two years. The vice-principal left the school shortly after for undisclosed reasons. These premature departures remain a mystery to the broader school community. Silence seems to be the organisational policy for resignations, though it is thought that pressures from the school's owner to perform better financially were behind these decisions. A preexisting crisis within the leadership team is an important factor to consider when looking at the nature of the school's approach to leadership if management would perhaps be the most appropriate term.

The two concepts are often used interchangeably but stand as entirely different insofar management is the ability to run a budget, cut costs, increase earnings, and address the more pragmatic everyday aspects of governance. Leadership belongs in the emotional, psychological realm. A leader is often capable of management, but managers are not always capable of leadership. Burns (1978 as cited in Gabriel, 1999) elaborates on this point, stating that leaders hold the potential to inspire the members of an organisation to share a collective dream and put in the overtime and effort they otherwise would not have. Because the future holds uncertainties and no person is guaranteed a return on their efforts, individuals invest their energy, attention, and feelings in an undertaking because they believe in the leader's fantasy and ability to turn it into reality. This is the power that hope has over each of us.

Gabriel (1999) wrote extensively on what can be defined as the ability of a leader to gain the trust of his employees. Leaders able to gain the trust of their employees often bear the brunt of most risks and uncertainties during a crisis, allowing their followers to focus on activities that relate to the organisation's primary task. The failure to gain the trust of one's employ-

ees has grave implications; distrust leads to a state of hopelessness where individuals are more likely to forget their loyalties, acting from self-preservation, and prioritise their individual needs to those of the organisation.

Hope, which can enact both effective and affective change, can only result from a symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers. When hope originates only in the leader, it can be read as self-idealisation. Although it stems from the followers, it can be interpreted as a state of basic assumption (Bion, 1961) whereby employees hold on to a vain sense of future hope, in the unlikely scenario that organizational problems will be solved with very little agency on their part.

The first Covid-19 outbreak in China would prove a paramount test on the ability of the SLT to gain the faculty members' trust. During the first weeks of lockdown in Shanghai, with close to half of the international teaching staff outside of the country, the first emails from the leadership team arrived as a response to maintain legitimacy and consolidate power. The principal wrote to the entire school community on the twenty-third of January, stressing the need for all staff members to return by the second of February while urging everyone to be available online during regular hours of operation and probably beyond. Another expectation was that careful consideration was to be placed on students' and parents' requests, thus entirely leaving the needs of staff members out of the equation. Returning to China at that time was a challenge if not impossible as most Western nations discouraged travelling to that country (and continue doing so to the present day), and flight tickets grew dearer and more expensive owing to the decreased transit in flights.

By failing to address the considerable risks that a flight back to China entailed, the leadership team stoked anxiety among teachers, which was only exacerbated by the seemingly more reasonable approaches taken by other international schools operating in the city of Shanghai. One such school

took no time in providing emergency flight stipends and reimbursements while arranging for accommodation within a neighbouring East Asian country thus ensuring that the teaching staff and respective families had their needs looked after. Other education organisations of similar size went as far as delaying the return date to the Spring break holiday by reshuffling their school calendar.

The email that followed a week later did acknowledge these efforts by other organisations and attributed the lack of flexibility to the school's governing board, reiterating that until instructed otherwise, the return date remained the second of February. The principal's decision supports the theory of behavioural rigidity (Staw, Sandelands & Dutton, 1981 as cited in Misha, 1996, p. 2), a typical response from organisations in crisis that often is accompanied by a consolidation of resources. It is also a typical sign of a basic assumption group where lack of creativity is apparent, and preference is placed upon quick, effortless solutions that often prove ineffective. From a psychodynamic perspective, the principal had projected his uncertainties onto the school community while leaving out the means to alleviate the emotional and financial stress felt by teachers and families alike. Many of the parents relied on their businesses as a source of income and saw these shut down during the pandemic.

Reactions from Staff Members and the School Community

It did not take long for the teachers themselves to introject the uncertainties from SLT, and for rumours to begin spreading regarding possible layoffs and salary cuts. The human resources team later announced that the school would be withholding salary bonuses and freezing the pay scale of those misfortunate enough not to be able to return by the assigned date. The parents' initial reaction to e-learning was also not a positive one. An alarming number were unhappy from the outset as the burden of catering for their children's educational needs fell on their shoulders while seeing to profes-

sional responsibilities at the same time. The parents' displeasure proved costly to the organisation, as only a month after eLearning had begun, survey data revealed that some one hundred students would not be rejoining even the school even after the pandemic was under control. The majority of departing families pointed to financial difficulties in paying the over forty thousand pounds of yearly tuition fees, although were also mounting accusations of poor teaching practices that could not solely be attributed to the transition to e-learning.

Adding to these pressures, the issue of the return date remained. Many staff members at this point had grown disenchanted with SLT on account of what they perceived as having to choose between their safety and wellbeing as well as their families, stacked against the school's expectations. Some of the remarks by teachers on social media forums included complaints that it was unreasonable to ask teachers to return to China without providing a reopening date and this at a time when many Western governments advised against travelling to China. Others chorused this same refrain which can be seen as both an example of introjection and denial. It also did not help that the vice-principal evaded questions about a specific day and plan for the school's reopening but remained intransigent that everyone should make plans to return by the third of February.

Narcissistic Leadership and the Failure to address the Crisis

Some psychoanalysts define leaders as salesmen of fantasies (Gabriel, 1991). Such fantasies are an essential part of organisations, acting as a way for employees to tie in their futures with that of the organisation while devoting time and effort they otherwise would not have. In other words, gaining the trust of employees is at the crux of leadership. Therefore, leaders must take stock in how employees perceive their abilities, benevolence, and integrity so as to inspire trust (Mayer et al., 1995 as cited in Priem & Nystrom, 2011, p. 777). It could also be relevant to determine whether it is

necessary for the leaders to believe the phantasies they are *selling*. Le Bon (1895 as cited in Freud, 1923, p. 134) advocates that the most significant means leaders possess to make their presence felt within an organisation is through the fantasies they themselves are fanatical believers in.

An example of narcissistic leadership in the context of the school was when a teaching couple who had between them worked for the institution for twenty-five years and found themselves laid off with little over a month's notice. The official reason provided by the school was that the couple's visas could not be renewed given that they were outside of the country, but the same could be said of the other two dozen staff members stranded outside of China's borders who did not lose their job.

Although the teaching couple was in good standing with both staff and students, they had also made a reputation for being outspoken during meetings with SLT and often asked the said *difficult* questions. One such example was when the female teacher asked whether there would be overtime payment for staff members on account of the school being virtually open during the Qingming national holiday. Chinese law stipulates that any individual working during a national holiday is entitled to three times the ordinary paying rate although the school did not comply with the law in this case.

The leader becomes the most important reality; questioning the leader's vision or wisdom becomes tantamount to betrayal. In this manner, organizations may inoculate themselves against reality, disregarding all signs of imminent disaster and marching happily and blindly to their doom. (Gabriel, 1991, p. 245)

Two weeks later, the couple announced that they would be leaving the school in the middle of the academic year even though their child had studied at the school for fifteen years and was still in China, unable to reunite with his parents. However, no official announcement was made as the school kept to its policy of silence which may be interpreted as another sign of institutionalised denial.

At a later stage, the leadership team did give in on the issue of the return date but failed to inform staff members of the need for all lessons and

meetings to be held through zoom thereon. Mandating face-to-face learning time, while contradicting earlier communications, led to a loss of trust not simply in the capacity of school leaders to protect the faculty from outside pressures but also the trustworthiness of the leader was now being called into question. Many of the twenty-five staff members who could not return to China felt their job were at risk and would effectively see their contracts terminated one by one.

After a month and a half of uncertainty related to the school's reopening date, the principal moved the mandatory return date for all staff members to March fifteenth; The directive nature of the email caused great acrimony among staff members but the email from the vice principal the very next morning was received with confusion. The vice-principal effectively contradicted his superior, reportedly giving in to pressures from a growing number of concerned staff although there were rumours that he could not find a return flight for his family also. His email reassured the faculty that travelling back to China was simply an expectation by the school and not mandatory. Ultimately, the leadership team was willing to consider that some staff members experienced extraordinary circumstances in returning. This was received with confusion by staff members outside of China and led to a disastrous outcome of over a third of the teaching faculty losing their jobs.

The Role that Trust Could Have Played in the Recalling of Teachers

Trust is a fundamental element to maintain cohesiveness and ensure the viability of any group- this is especially true in times of great adversity. An example of how lack of trust in leadership can lead to catastrophic outcomes is the case study led by Priem and Nystrom (2014), which examines the failure of a recently formed workgroup of British soldiers attempting to traverse Borneo's infamous low gully. Adverse weather conditions and a series of miscalculations eventually separated the soldiers into two par-

ties. The less physically able soldiers were unable to find their way out of the gully, calling for an international rescue mission that drew enormous international media attention. Despite a happy ending for the lost soldiers, the failure of the low gully expedition group cannot solely be attributed to *force majeure* causes such as adverse weather. The inexperience of the leader, miscalculations, and the soldier's reluctance to follow instructions driven by a lack of trust in their leader's competence also played a pivotal role. The authors of this study conclude that trust and distrust can coexist in a complex interrelationship. Employees can trust their leader in some respects and less so in others, as was the case in the expedition (p. 789).

After the rescue mission had retrieved them, the soldiers reported to trust their leader's survival skills but took it upon themselves to chart and traverse the gully, ignoring the leader's directions to ensure their own self-preservation.

The distrust between the reconnaissance party and the officers led the reconnaissance party to engage in constructive deviance (Warren, 2003) to complete the mission. They went against the principles taught during army training and socialization when they proceeded down the gully. Their decision to continue toward civilization after Neill's party did not arrive at the gully floor by the appointed time ultimately enabled them to raise the alarm that initiated the rescue of the main party. (p. 790)

It is equally important to define trust from an organisational lens. Trust is the process of undistorted communication and decentralised decision-making (Mishra, 1996, p. 3). In the case of the recalling of the staff members, trust could have materialized in a more honest and ample debate about the limitations of the school in ensuring a safe return and what further means of support could have been offered. The leadership team had extended concessions to individual teachers lacking in electronic devices to deliver virtual classes, ensuring funds were readily available. A similar decision would have guaranteed the timely return of teachers struggling to pay for the exorbitantly expensive flight tickets. Some international schools had gone as far as arranging charter flights for staff members and their families. Within this

context, trust and respect are not to be mistaken for prestige (Freud, 1923), a concept that translates into depositing blind faith upon a leader based on perceptions and assumptions of success.

Instead, the principal moved the return date to March 15th, but it was too late as flights were practically impossible to book at that time. To make matters worse, eleven days later, China closed its borders on all foreign passport holders (Politico, 2020) along with most of its consular offices and embassies as the first outbreak raged on in Europe, and the virus had reached the shores of the USA. It meant that thirty percent of staff members remained outside of the country with no chance to renew their yearly visas. A few weeks later, around five other teachers saw their contracts terminated upon the school's reopening. The process was perceived as arbitrary, and resentment grew towards the vice principal grew significantly. Incidentally, he himself was unable to return to China although his contract was not terminated until well into the following school year.

Transitioning to e-learning

One-third of the faculty had over twenty years of working experience and an average of ten years working at the school. This group consists of individuals whose professional identities stemmed from an earlier time when the school was regarded as a top-tier education establishment on account of external exam results and high enrolment numbers. Prestige (Le Bon, 1895 as cited in Freud, 1923) was like unto a badge of honour, worn by many of the senior teachers; acting as a kind of denial, a primitive defence that seeks to omit the role which they had played in the school's decline and eroding reputation. Leaders often use the unique ability that prestige holds to paralyze the individual's critical thinking ability and demand obedience, the caveat being that prestige is wholly dependent on the success and dissipates upon failure.

Groups are by nature conservative, bound by tradition, and highly suspi-

scious of any new advances and innovations (Freud, 1923, p. 15). Hence, it was no surprise that the faculty did not welcome the transition to e-learning. At first, the working group moved from a state of depressive anxiety to one of mistrust. This was made clear via official and unofficial channels such as private online forums; when told to deliver all scheduled lessons via the Zoom online platform, many of the longstanding staff took to make their positions clear.

Although some of this discontentment might be attributed to unwelcome change and the staff's reluctance to fully engage in the practice of teaching during a time of crisis (James, 2010 as cited in Dale & James, p. 43), the reasoning behind the complaints is no less sound; Teachers felt undertrained as relates to Zoom, an unfamiliar platform (one of three others mandated by the school for e-learning). In this regard, recent studies bring to light very many reports of hardware and software compatibility issues, a common problem for educators transitioning to e-learning worldwide (Aboagye et al., 2020, as cited in Akpinar, 2021). There was one specific challenge to this organisation: a vertiginous drop in student attendance though this problem was justified by educators and students operating under different time zones.

Much like in the case of sergeant Neill's party, the school's faculty was compliant at first with the higher levels of monitoring either under the guise of *drop-ins* (a minimum requirement of two lesson observations per week was set by the leadership team), and the expectation that every lesson required a granulated version of a written lesson plan. However, the distrust of the leadership team's ability to steer the school through the e-learning transition led teachers to adapt to the circumstances of each class. The expectation of delivering every lesson in its entirety via zoom proved unsustainable to many; thirty percent of students were outside of China at the time and required to attend classes under the China time zone. At the same time, many were also dealing with personal adversities of their, own

not least of which, depression which, according to some studies, was experienced by a third of students worldwide (Akpinar, 2021) as a normal consequence of uncertainty on when a return to school would be possible and being cut off from their schoolmates and friends for an extended period of time, and in the case of this school and other international schools, cut off from their family in many cases. The school performed well in this regard, providing a virtual space for mental health support, and having the full-time mental health counsellor to reach out to students who were alone in Shanghai. Unfortunately, the same support was not extended to the staff members.

Such feelings were projected onto the teachers and manifested during virtual classes in the form of switched-off cameras and very tepid participation during class activities. Another concerning trend was the percentage of lower school students producing and uploading any homework.

The expectation of having a written lesson plan for each virtual lesson added a voluminous bureaucratic layer to an already stressed and anxious workgroup experiencing a period of transition. Increases in bureaucratic workload and more scrutiny at work have been associated with increased stress and anxiety levels among teachers (Pearson & Moowaw, 2005, p. 49). To make matters worse, and to once again consolidate power, the principal announced that the monetary gratuity included in the school's contract for foreign teachers would be from then on tied in with e-learning performance and compliance with the new directives in what many teachers received as a clear breach of contract.

Trust and Hope as an alternative strategy

A way for leaders to build trust is to avoid using denial as an organisational defence (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994, p. 142) and recognise the limitations of their decisions and influence as opposed to enforcing further monitoring of their employees. An alternative strategy in the case of this school could have been outreaching to the middle managers and inviting teachers to partake in planning the transition to online lessons. Such a change in interaction would have likely created a healthier working culture and encouraged collaborative autonomy amongst teachers which in turn would help foster a more positive attitude from the students and parents.

Teacher autonomy is a direct result of a leader's trust and is closely linked to teacher motivation (Pearson & Moowaw, 2005; Vangrieken et al., 2017). Autonomy, alongside positive student behaviour and support from management, are effective counters to prevent stress and anxiety and promote teacher satisfaction. In addition, there could have been merit in reaching out to the school's parent association and providing a forum for teachers (Dale & James, 2005, p. 98; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994, p. 140), thus requiring the school community at large to actively partake in designing a curriculum that would best cater for the needs of the students. In addition, using strategies such as flipped classroom and blended learning (lessons to be delivered partially through face-to-face zoom sessions partly via other online platforms) were standard solutions adopted by many schools during the first lockdowns. Finally, providing staff with a space for reflection on the newly adopted measures could have also helped alleviate negative feelings such as anxiety or stress. It must also be acknowledged that most school leaders worldwide did not have to consider the added challenges of their faculty members finding themselves scattered around the globe nor having to weigh in the consequences of border closures, as was the case with international schools based in China. Although, ultimately, accountability must lie with school managers.

Conclusion

In this essay, we sought to illustrate how competence, openness, concern, and reliability (Mishra, 1996, p. 2) act as the pillars of trust. To varying degrees, the leadership team of this international school failed to find purchase on all four; first by failing to show concern over its employees, neglecting to put systems in place such as a virtual space and allotted time for mental health guidance or offering relocation assistance to those stranded with their families in foreign countries. As a result, teachers were led to a state of self-preservation, ultimately hurting the organisation's interests in the medium- and long-term.

The decision on how to roll out e-learning was a top-down decision and these often fail to gain traction when those who are expected to implement these decisions disagree with the changes and are not invited to partake in the deliberation phase (Ingersoll Alsalam, p. 7 as cited in Pearson & Moowaw, 2005, p. 40). There is an intrinsic relationship between reliability and competence which partially unraveled during the school's handling of the pandemic. The contradictory emails from the principal and vice-principal confounded the faculty, leaving many confused on whether it was compulsory to return to China or not. Adding to this, the termination of contracts to a number of those who had, for one reason or another, failed to return a month later created a profound sense of betrayal (Webb, 1994 as cited in Mishra, 1996, p. 24) that remains to this day in the organisation. Such a perceived lack of trust in the school's leadership team posits the decision taken by the school's owner to terminate both the principal and the vice principal contracts only three months after the school reopening.

Some evident limitations of this study include its small sample size making it difficult to draw generalisations. There was also the difficulty of gathering reliable data during that time as the onset of the pandemic posed an enormous challenge in maintaining consistent communication with both colleagues and students. A different psychodynamic approach could have

also been used to analyse this critical incident, for instance, a dual framework of group-work mentality versus basic-assumption mentality pivoted by Wilfred Bion (1961). This framework could potentially act as an alternative way to explain the low performance of the e-learning measures during the first weeks of the pandemic, stemming from increased levels of fear, anxiety, guilt, and anger felt by most teachers within the organisation.

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