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NAVIGATING CRISES IN EDUCATION: A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES IN PK-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

By
Darian L. Byrd
August 2024

Dr. Hans Klar, Committee Chair
Dr. Phillip Grant
Dr. Danielle Hall Sutherland
Dr. Barbara Nesbitt

ABSTRACT

This study explores the crisis communication strategies utilized by superintendents and communication leaders in PK-12 public school districts, focusing on their structural, human resource, political, and symbolic dimensions. Employing a qualitative, multi-site, multi-case study approach, this research delves into the communication frameworks, practices, and decision-making processes during crises, providing a comprehensive understanding of effective crisis management in educational settings.

The research is anchored in Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, which offers a multidimensional perspective on organizational analysis. By integrating this theoretical framework, the study examines how different communication strategies align with structural, human resource, political, and symbolic aspects of crisis management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with superintendents and communication leaders from various South Carolina school districts, selected based on their recent experiences with crisis events.

Findings reveal that effective crisis management heavily relies on structured communication systems, strategic practices, and thoughtful decision-making. Each district in this study employs centralized communication structures and clear protocols, facilitating swift and effective communication during crises. Superintendents and communication leaders leverage these structured channels to ensure accuracy and consistency in messages disseminated to stakeholders, thereby upholding the integrity and trust of the district during turbulent times. Key insights include the importance of

adaptability, the role of empathy in communication, and the strategic use of media and technology to disseminate information. Additionally, proactive communication practices, such as regular updates and community engagement, are crucial for maintaining transparency and trust.

The study underscores the interplay between different frames, suggesting that a balanced approach incorporating structural efficiency, human empathy, political acuity, and symbolic impact is essential for effective crisis management in educational environments. These findings contribute to the broader literature on educational leadership and crisis management, offering practical recommendations for enhancing communication strategies in PK-12 public school districts. Future research should continue to explore the evolving nature of crises in education and the corresponding communication strategies, ensuring that school leaders are well-equipped to navigate complex and dynamic crisis scenarios.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible family, whose support and love have been my guiding light throughout this journey.

To my beloved wife, Amy, and our wonderful children, Will and Charlotte, your patience, encouragement, and unwavering belief in me have been the bedrock of my strength. Amy, your understanding and countless sacrifices have made this accomplishment possible. I am constantly amazed at the ongoing impact you make on our family and the students you reach in your classroom. Will and Charlotte, you are my constant inspiration, and I hope this achievement shows you the power of perseverance and dedication.

To my parents, Wayne and Yvonne Byrd, thank you for your endless love and support. Growing up as a preacher's and teacher's kid, I faced unique challenges that built resilience and prepared me for life. Your guidance and the values you instilled in me have shaped who I am today.

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This journey has been marked by gratitude, patience, and fortitude. I am blessed to have a world-class support team, including family and friends who have provided their time, opinions, and editing skills to make my work better. Your support, sacrifices, and patience have made this process possible. Thank you all for being my ultimate role models.

To the village that raised me, thank you for shaping the person I have become. My mission is to preserve our history, create our future, and inspire the next generation. I hope this work reflects the values and lessons you have imparted to me.

This dissertation is a testament to the strength of family, the power of resilience, and the importance of unwavering support. Thank you all for being my guiding lights and constant sources of inspiration.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, leaders have faced turbulence, which has tested them during their tenure. As Eddy and Kirby (2020) noted, “All leaders will face a crisis of some type” (p. 79). District leaders may encounter various types of crises, such as a school closure, extreme weather conditions, the presence of a weapon on campus, teacher misconduct, the death of a student or staff member, and, more recently, an event like the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis situations within educational settings are complex and multifaceted, requiring clear, effective communication from district administrators. Every crisis varies in scope and duration and consequently impacts school districts and communities differently. At the center of crisis management, superintendents, communications leaders, and others managing crisis leadership often contend with the dual challenges of crisis resolution and effective communication with multiple stakeholders, including staff, students, parents, and the broader community.

The role of the contemporary school superintendent is distinctive within the public education system. Serving as the primary leader of the local educational system, the superintendent holds considerable trust and authority in educational matters. Over time, the responsibilities and expectations of school leaders have continually evolved to address changing priorities within the education sector. The superintendent's role has evolved to encompass both managerial and leadership functions, which involve influencing others, collaborating effectively, and establishing and achieving common goals (Northouse, 2016). The 2020 decennial study by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) surveyed superintendents to identify the key reasons for their hiring. The most common response, given by 76.1% of participants, was personal attributes such as honesty and integrity. Additionally, 59.2% highlighted the ability to

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communicate with various community stakeholders, while 57.8% emphasized the importance of being an instructional leader (Tienken, 2021). These results indicate that superintendents are perceived to require the ability to communicate and display honesty and integrity more than the ability to be an instructional leader.

The significance of effective communication from superintendents has become increasingly apparent in today's information-driven society. Kowalski (2005) highlighted the necessity of effective communication from superintendents as a response to the convergence of an information-based society and the rising dissatisfaction with public education. New technologies that offer convenience, efficiency, and effectiveness play a crucial role in enhancing parent-school communication (Zieger & Tan, 2012). While new communication methods using technology can speed up communication, the lack of technology can limit communication opportunities. Parents are now required to navigate various communication methods, such as school websites, e-mail updates, phone calls home, and traditional backpack letters. Early web-based technologies, like e-mail and online grade books, increased the information available to parents. Recent technological advancements offer various new media platforms to enhance communication methods and foster greater parental involvement and knowledge by facilitating improved coordination and communication between schools, school districts, and families (Kraft & Bolves, 2022). These advancements underscore the ongoing evolution of communication strategies in education, highlighting the need for adaptive and inclusive approaches.

As the demand for prompt communication grows, school districts and superintendents need to reassess their communication strategies to ensure they effectively reach all families and stakeholders. According to Edmonson (2020), transparency is job one for leaders in a crisis. District leaders are now expected to excel in communication by engaging stakeholders in

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political dialogue, sharing their visions, creating a positive image, garnering community support for change, and keeping the public well-informed (Learned-Miller, 2022). Although leaders may feel the urge to act swiftly during a crisis, they must dedicate time to fostering open communication (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Leaders in a crisis should prioritize transparency as their primary responsibility. Effective communication in times of crisis relies on well-established resources and structures that facilitate the exchange of information and engagement (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020). These mechanisms are crucial in conveying critical information, fostering trust, and building a sense of community during normal operations and crises.

Effective communication is a crucial skill for superintendents, yet it is often underestimated in its importance. Unfortunately, many superintendents assume anyone can communicate effectively (Kowalski, 2006). An organization's successful public relations approach must focus on communication (Kowalski, 2011). Hill and Jochim (2017) emphasized that superintendents must have a deep understanding of their audience and possess the ability to adapt their communication style to engage a diverse group of stakeholders effectively. Many superintendents question the relevance of allocating funds and designating time to engage in public relations (Kowalski, 2011). According to research, administrators and superintendents have experienced poor performance reviews and even termination due to inconsistent and poor communication (Davis, 2000; Kornegay, 2022). Therefore, investing in effective communication strategies is not only beneficial but essential for the success of district leaders.

Information management and communication are continuous core activities in any organization. Abrams (2020) highlighted that clear communication, honesty, transparency, and preparedness are vital components of effective leadership in times of crisis. In school districts, the question of who will provide the community and the families with school-aged children with

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the information necessary in times of crisis varies. Most often, in small districts, the superintendent serves in the communications role and can meet information and public relations demands. Larger districts often have central office staff for public relations and communications, although the staff will most likely be minimal.

Regardless of the district's size, the methods and structures for managing crisis communication can differ greatly. Studies indicate that having a district spokesperson, such as the superintendent or a designated communications leader, is essential for effective crisis communication (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Roshan et al., 2016). Crisis communication becomes more effective when conveyed by someone who shows empathy and genuine concern. (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Zdziarski, 2016). Thus, selecting an appropriate spokesperson is vital for successful crisis management.

The relationship between a public school district and its internal and external stakeholders is essential in shaping its reputation before, during, and after a crisis. The increasing likelihood of real or perceived crises in schools has led district leaders to develop protocols to manage critical incidents and address public perception in the aftermath (Baran & Adelman, 2010; Trainor & Velotti, 2013). As public school issues become more controversial and challenging, many school boards and superintendents are opting to develop public relations options to handle media management and communication by hiring an in-house employee as a full-time public relations practitioner or assigning the public relations responsibility to an existing administrator (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Payne et al., 2018). These measures underscore the importance of proactive and professional public relations strategies in maintaining trust and credibility.

This study explores the various components that make up crisis strategies at the district level of PK-12 public schools. My specific areas of interest center on understanding the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis. In this introductory chapter, I provide the necessary background and justification for the development of this study. Before discussing how superintendents process and deal with crises, I give some background information on the issue at hand. I then present the research questions that comprise the focus of this study. Finally, I detail the significance of the problem and provide the limitations and assumptions inherent to this study.

Statement of the Problem

Crises in PK-12 public school districts can potentially disrupt educational processes and negatively impact community trust. Crisis management and the ability to communicate effectively during times of crisis are essential skills of school district leaders. However, what works in one school district or school will differ from what may be most effective in another district. This variation underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping effective leadership and communication strategies. According to Bredeson et al. (2011), context matters significantly in educational leadership, as the unique characteristics and needs of each district influence the most suitable approaches to communication and crisis management. Seeger (2006) cautioned against assuming that best practices in crisis communication fit across organization types and stressed the importance of understanding contexts and situations. Understanding these nuances is essential for developing tailored strategies that address specific challenges and leverage the strengths of each district.

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It is critical to recognize the distinctive role of a public school. While crises arise in both school districts and private businesses, the private sector is notably different from public schools. Within the private sector, adults are most often directly engaged in crises, and the company's primary concerns are motivated by continuing profits. In contrast, public schools primarily consist of young people ranging from three to 18 years of age. Throughout each school day, these students, who are not in the care of their parents, often outnumber the supervising adults by a ratio of 18 or more students per teacher. It is important to recognize that during a crisis, the supervising teacher or staff member experiences the same stress and fear as the children. The supervising adults are responsible for understanding the crisis, maintaining composure, forming a response, and securing every child under their supervision. Efficient communication is essential because parents do not have immediate contact with their children during emergencies (Elbedour et al., 2020). Unlike non-educational settings, schools present a unique environment with distinct challenges that need to be considered when preparing for emergencies and communicating during a crisis (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Thompson et al., 2017a). Thus, understanding these unique factors is crucial for developing effective crisis management strategies in educational settings.

Although a significant amount of research is available on crisis management in the private sector, more studies need to be conducted that specifically investigate crises that occur in public schools. The majority of existing research on crisis communication is found in journals related to communications, public relations, crisis management, and business. These studies primarily focus on business organizations, governmental agencies, and higher education institutions (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2011; Ulmer, 2001). However, there is a notable lack of research on crisis management and communication, specifically within PK-12 public schools

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(Barker & Yoder, 2012; Mazer et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017b). This gap in the literature results in a limited understanding of how PK-12 institutions, which have distinct stakeholder groups and societal obligations, handle crises. Consequently, the existing research does not adequately address the structures, practices, and decision-making processes that school leaders should use for effective crisis communication.

Another critical gap is understanding the role of school district leaders, such as superintendents and communications leaders, during crises. Leaders in schools and districts must be familiar with the fundamentals of effective communication and crisis management.) Crisis management is multifaceted, prompting school leaders to be able to strategically approach an unforeseen, chaotic event and maintain a positive relationship with stakeholders throughout the duration of the crisis (Gainey, 2009; Schechter et al., 2022). To enhance the preparedness of school districts for future crises, it is imperative for researchers to delve deeper into this subject (Coombs, 2007; Gurr, 2020; Harris, 2020). Given the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and families, effective communication with stakeholders has become increasingly critical for public school districts.

The pandemic compelled school leaders across the United States and globally to assume roles as crisis managers and communicators for an extended duration. Due to COVID-19, “a new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times that will possibly overtake and overshadow all that was written before on the topic” (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 246). The evolving nature of crises in public schools, especially in the wake of events like the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitates a deeper exploration of the leadership strategies and decision-making processes specific to educational contexts.

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There is also a need to examine how well-established theoretical frameworks, like Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, are applied in the real-world context of PK-12 education during crises (Bolman & Deal, 2021). This application is crucial for understanding practical strategies and the underlying theories guiding leaders and communication in crisis situations. Furthermore, studies exploring the effectiveness of communication strategies employed by PK-12 school leaders during crises are sparse. While general crisis communication strategies are well-documented (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2011), their applicability and efficacy in the specific context of K-12 education require more thorough investigation. There is an apparent necessity for research focusing specifically on crisis management and communication within PK-12 public school districts, particularly from the perspective of district-level leaders. This study aimed to fill these gaps by providing insights into crisis communication strategies in the unique context of PK-12 education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site, multi-case study was to investigate the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis. According to Bolman and Deal (2021), "Effective managers need the skill to sort through the alternatives and the wisdom to match the right story to the situations" (p. 21). As organizational leaders, Superintendents must possess the necessary abilities to lead through any experienced crisis effectively. This research explores the experiences of school leaders during and immediately after crises, examining the changing dynamics of crises in public schools and the crucial role that school leaders assume in these scenarios. It aims to gather and synthesize the knowledge and expertise of multiple district leaders in South Carolina who have successfully navigated through

crises. Employing Bolman and Deal's (2021) Four-Frame Model, the study will enhance understanding of how district-level structures and crisis communication strategies help leaders effectively manage real or perceived crises.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study seek to improve knowledge of the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors connected with leadership decision-making during crises and subsequent communications. This analysis will examine the concept of crisis leadership and communication by applying Bolman and Deal's (2021) Four-Frame Model within the framework of constructivist epistemology. The following research questions and sub-questions will guide the study:

Main research question: How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?

Sub-question 1: What specific communication structures and practices are most commonly utilized by superintendents and communications executives in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations?

- This sub-question seeks to identify and analyze the specific methods and channels of communication employed during crises, examining how these practices vary across different types of crises and school districts.

Sub-question 2: In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model?

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- This sub-question explores the alignment of crisis decision-making with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, providing insight into how theory is put into practice in real-world crisis scenarios within the educational setting.

I addressed these research questions with a focus on the decisions made during times of crisis to determine the approach used by the leaders to handle crises. Each of Bolman and Deal's frames (structural, human resource, political, symbolic) were applied to analyze how different aspects of district organization and communication align with or diverge from each frame during crisis events (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Selecting an appropriate theoretical framework from an existing theory in literature for research is an important and necessary process when designing a study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Merriam & Tisdell (2015) state that a theoretical framework functions as a tool for developing concepts and providing research support. According to Merriam and Tisdell,

The sense we make of the data we collect is equally influenced by the theoretical framework. That is, our analysis and interpretation- our study's findings- will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place. (p. 70)

The following theoretical framework offers valuable lenses through which to study district-community communications during crises. By leveraging the insights and concepts of this framework, I designed a study that provides a deeper understanding of communication strategies, stakeholder perceptions, and community engagement during real or perceived crises.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model

Bolman and Deal's (2021) Four-Frame Model guided this study. Bolman and Deal's model, introduced in 1984, is grounded in sociology, psychology, political science, and anthropology and their work with thousands of leaders. This theoretical framework allows leaders to analyze organizational issues from four perspectives, collectively providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenge. This organizational reframing approach seeks to minimize inefficiencies when leaders exclusively stick to their own frame of reference, commonly referred to as a leader's habitual frame (Bolman & Deal, 2021). The four frames outlined by Bolman and Deal are: 1) Structural Frame; 2) Human Resources Frame; 3) Political Frame; and 4) Symbolic Frame. Their work is a widely accepted method of organizational analysis for leaders and a resource for programs of study in educational institutions. Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model provided a multi-dimensional perspective for understanding crisis communication strategies. Each frame (structural, human resource, political, symbolic) was applied to analyze how different aspects of district organization and communication align with or diverge from each frame during crisis events.

Crisis leadership poses a specific challenge for leaders of school districts to consider addressing through reframing (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Although leaders tend to be admired and respected, they are often judged based on criteria that simplify their performance perception to their worst single decision (Morgan, 2006). These decisions are frequently determined by the relationship between institutions and their environment rather than being purely influenced by leadership choices (2006). Internal and external stakeholders rely on school district leaders to address the most complex issues affecting PK-12 public education. These leaders are often both praised and condemned for the decisions they make regarding these problems (Davis, 2000).

Applying Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model as a theoretical framework enables the generation of new knowledge in this arena by analyzing data to support leaders.

Conceptual Framework and Research Design

The conceptual framework of a study involves the researcher's understanding of how the problem will best be explored and the specific direction the study will take (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In this study, I adopted a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of crisis communication strategies within PK-12 public school districts. The primary data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with PK-12 school district leaders who have dealt with crises in their schools. I conducted these semi-structured interviews with superintendents and communications leaders from selected South Carolina school districts, chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a commonly employed technique in qualitative research, where cases or sites are selected intentionally to offer a comprehensive and extensive range of information. (Creswell, 2018). I chose school district leaders through purposeful sampling based on the following criteria: school district leader of a PK-12 public school district (superintendents and communications leaders), being in a leadership role during a school crisis, and the crisis is less than five years old.

The analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, a flexible tool for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Transcripts of the recordings containing the results of the interviews were analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis (QDA) software by QSR International (Lumivero, 2023). After the initial thematic analysis using NVivo, I mapped and interpreted the data against Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, enabling a structured comparison across cases and enhancing the understanding of how different frames influence crisis leadership and communication (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Definition of Key Terms

Below is a compilation of terms that are used throughout this study. The definitions provided here aim to establish context and ensure uniformity in applying the terms within this research.

- **Communication:** Communication, as defined by Pearson and Nelson (2000), refers to the interaction among participants creating and sharing information with one another to reach a mutual understanding. This interaction is not merely the transmission of information but involves the exchange of meanings and the establishment of common ground. Additionally, as identified by Bradler et al. (2009), communication encompasses both vertical and horizontal information flows. Vertical communication involves upward and downward exchanges between different levels of an organizational hierarchy, facilitating command and control as well as feedback processes (2009). Horizontal communication, on the other hand, includes parallel information flows among entities at the same level, such as between first responders or various departments within a school district (2009). One-way communication allows schools to inform families about programs, events, student learning, and behavior. In contrast, two-way communication facilitates a dialogue where schools and families can exchange ideas and information. Some examples include newsletters, emails, phone calls, texts, automated messages, social media posts, and communication via platforms like Parent Square, Finalsite, School Messenger, Aptegey Thrillshare, and Blackboard.
- **Communications Leaders:** the person(s) accountable for public relations responsibilities in a school district. The title “communications leader” will be applied to those respondents who indicate titles such as public information officers (PIOs),

communications directors, communications officers, public relations directors, and even marketing directors. The term communications leader is used interchangeably throughout this study.

- **Crisis:** While the term "crisis" can be understood broadly and differently by various individuals, Coombs (2023) precisely defined a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders regarding health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can significantly impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2023, p.4). An early definition offered in the research by Weick (1988) stated that a crisis is viewed as "a low probability/high consequence event that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization" (Weick, 1988, p. 305). A crisis inherently possesses the capacity to abruptly inflict substantial negative impacts upon an organization.
- **Crisis Communication:** Crisis communication seeks to clarify specific events or incidents, outline potential consequences, and provide timely, honest, accurate, and complete information to affected communities. It is closely associated with public relations practices, strategically managing and framing public perceptions to reduce harm for both the organization and stakeholders (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 46). According to Seeger (2006), crisis communication processes aim to minimize and control damage, deliver precise information to relevant parties, initiate and enhance recovery efforts, manage public perception of fault and accountability, restore credibility, gain support and assistance, clarify and defend actions, express apologies, and foster healing, learning, and change. Fearn-Banks (2011) describes crisis communication as "verbal, visual, and/or

written interaction between the organization and its stakeholders (often through the media) prior to, during, and after a negative occurrence" (p. 480).

- **Crisis Communication Strategies:** For the purpose of this dissertation, *crisis communication strategies* encompass the structures, practices, and decision-making factors that educational leaders utilize to manage and convey information during a crisis in K-12 public school districts. These strategies are integral to ensuring that communication is timely, accurate, and effective, thereby playing a critical role in the overall crisis management efforts of the school district. They involve a combination of planned structures, adaptable practices, and context-driven decision-making to address the unique challenges of each crisis situation.
 - **Communication Structures:** In the context of crisis communication in PK-12 public school districts, communication structures refer to the established channels, systems, and networks through which information is disseminated and exchanged during a crisis. This includes the hierarchy and leadership roles that are unique to each school district. These structures provide the framework for how information flows within the school district and to external stakeholders, ensuring that critical messages are effectively conveyed and received during crisis situations. They also include formal and informal means of communication, ranging from digital platforms (like district websites and social media) to traditional methods (such as public announcements and direct meetings).
 - **Practices:** Practices in crisis communication entail the specific actions, procedures, and methods employed by educational leaders to communicate during a crisis. This encompasses the techniques and approaches used to craft messages,

the timing and frequency of communications, the selection of communication channels, and the strategies for engaging with various stakeholders. Practices also include the development of content, such as press releases or social media posts, and the ways in which leaders adapt their communication style to suit the crisis context and audience needs.

- **Decision-Making Factors:** Decision-making factors in the realm of crisis communication strategies involve the various elements and considerations that influence how educational leaders make choices about communication during a crisis. These factors can include the nature and severity of the crisis, the needs and concerns of different stakeholders, the availability of information, legal and ethical considerations, and the impact of communication on the school district's reputation and community trust. Decision-making factors guide leaders in determining what information to communicate, when to disseminate it, and how to frame messages to effectively manage the crisis.
- **Crisis Leadership:** Wooten and James (2008) determined that “crisis leadership competencies include activities such as decision making, communication, creating organizational capabilities, sustaining an effective organizational culture, managing multiple constituencies, and developing human capital” (p. 354). Crisis leadership refers to an individual's ability to identify unclear situations that contain hidden dangers and possibilities in order to be well-prepared, determine the appropriate course of action, make crucial decisions, motivate and lead others, and successfully mitigate or minimize adverse impacts while maximizing positive outcomes within a specific timeframe (Canyon, 2020).

- **Crisis Management:** Crisis management refers to the overall coordination of an organization's response to a crisis. This includes determining which emergency agencies, such as local police, fire departments, or medical responders, need to be called in immediately for assistance with various types of emergencies, such as active shooter incidents, fires, or severe medical emergencies. It also involves outlining what other stakeholders need to do and the actions required by individuals directly involved in the crisis. Although most school districts possess crisis management plans (or emergency plans), a much smaller number have crisis communication plans. (Elbedour et al., 2020).
- **Frames (Or Leadership Frames):** The key theoretical framework of this study was the leadership frames, as referenced by Bolman and Deal (2021). These frames offer a perspective for leaders to comprehend the challenges they experience and the assumptions they may hold about these challenges, as well as the potential actions they can take in response.
 - **Structural Frame:** Themes related to policies, rules, roles, and procedures will fall under this frame. The structural frame is compared to a machine or factory, and the critical driving assumptions include prioritizing putting the right people in the right places and adapting the organization's structure to the challenge or task (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
 - **Human Resource Frame:** Themes reflecting interpersonal relations, communication styles, and emotional aspects will be analyzed within this frame. The human resource frame is concerned with aligning people and roles, prioritizing the empowerment of employees, and focusing on creating relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

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- ***Political Frame:*** Themes involving power dynamics, conflicts, resource allocation, and external influences will be considered under this frame. The political frame is compared metaphorically to a jungle, where leaders are forced to compete for scarce resources, and gather power through growing networks and managing conflict appropriately (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
- ***Symbolic Frame:*** Themes associated with culture, meaning, and symbolism in the leadership and communication styles will be mapped to this frame. The symbolic frame is the most theatrical and ritualistic of the frames, where leaders can call upon powerful themes, organizational heroes, and shared passion to inspire unity and meaning for the work that needs to be done (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
- **Organizational Crises:** Crises that affect the management of an organization, employees and stakeholders, and the surrounding community. Defined as “an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholders interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis” (Millar & Heath, 2003, p. 2), crises occur in all industries, social contexts, and organizational structures.
- **Superintendent:** The superintendent, designated by and accountable to a School Board, serves as the primary executive of a school district. Throughout this study, the terms superintendent and superintendency have been specifically employed to denote the educational leader of a local public school district in the United States.

Assumptions and Limitations

Qualitative research and interviews are subject to various limiting factors. The researcher, acting as the primary means of inquiry in qualitative interviews, has the potential to introduce a certain degree of bias that may appear intrusive or judgmental (Creswell, 2018). In order to

obtain precise and authentic information from the participants, it is necessary to reduce the level of bias. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument and must impartially filter through the data provided by the participants. However, this process may be hindered by the researcher's personal context and the participants' capacity to articulate their own viewpoints. It was imperative for me, as the researcher, to understand my personal context within the confines of this research. As a communications leader for a school district and a former administrator with over a decade of experience, I recognized the importance of being mindful of potential biases. I made a deliberate effort to understand various perspectives instead of solely relying on my background and experiences to interpret the data.

My research centered on isolated crisis events rather than the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it was important to recognize that the leaders participating in this study were likely managing their district roles throughout the pandemic. Interviewing leaders about a crisis while they were concurrently handling another one introduces additional complexity. Although I could not assess how leading through the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their ability to reflect on past crisis events, their concurrent experience might have provided them with unique and enriched perspectives on crisis management. This dual challenge potentially offered deeper insights into the strategies and resilience needed to navigate multiple crises simultaneously.

Significance of the Study

A school leader's ability to make prompt decisions during a crisis and effectively communicate the ongoing events and subsequent actions is critical to the success of the educational organization. This study explored the crisis communication strategies and organizational frameworks employed by PK-12 public school district leaders, providing valuable insights into their specific approaches and methods. Using Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame

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Model, the study offers a comprehensive view of how communication strategies align with different organizational practices during crises. Findings could potentially assist school district superintendents, school public relations specialists, and future researchers in gaining a thorough understanding of which communication strategies, structures, and trends are effective during actual and perceived crises, as well as which procedures need to be strengthened in order to be ready for future crises.

The study of crisis leadership and crisis communication provides a solid basis for conducting additional research in the context of PK-12 schools. The objective of this study was to investigate the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis. This qualitative case study was combined with a supplementary theoretical framework to further understand the multifaceted field of crisis leadership. The results of this study can aid district leaders in developing crisis communication strategies by identifying the key factors that should be considered during the planning process.

Summary

Schools have consistently encountered crises, making effective communication between schools and families crucial. This research aims to support district and school leaders in enhancing their decision-making and communication methods during crises and provide recommendations for revising their existing crisis management strategies. In this chapter, I have established the need for a deeper understanding of how superintendents and communications leaders navigate the complexities of crises, employing various strategies and frameworks. This chapter not only underscores the importance of effective crisis management in educational settings but also highlights the critical role of leaders in such scenarios. This study aimed to

contribute to the field of educational leadership, offering valuable insights into crisis communication strategies and decision-making processes in PK-12 public school districts.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, each designed to comprehensively guide the reader through the research process and findings. Chapter One provides an introduction to the study, including the background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical and conceptual framework, definition of key terms, assumptions and limitations, and significance of the study. This chapter sets the stage for understanding the importance of crisis communication in PK-12 public school districts.

Chapter Two presents a literature review that critically examines existing research related to crisis planning, crisis communication protocols, and leadership roles within PK-12 school districts. This chapter explores various definitions of crises, the evolution of crisis management in education, and the theoretical underpinnings of effective communication during crises. It also reviews relevant models and frameworks, such as Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, and situates the study within the broader context of educational leadership and crisis management literature.

Chapter Three delineates the research design and methodology of the study. This chapter describes the qualitative multi-site, multi-case study approach, including participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. It details the use of semi-structured interviews with superintendents and communications leaders, the application of thematic analysis using NVivo software, and the integration of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model to interpret the findings.

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Chapter Four presents the data analysis and findings of the study. It organizes the data by district, provides an overview of the data collection process, and discusses the themes that emerged from the interviews. This chapter includes a cross-case analysis, highlighting commonalities and differences in communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors across the four school districts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings and a transition to the final chapter.

Chapter Five offers a summary, a discussion, and conclusions based on the study's findings. It revisits the research questions, integrates the findings with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, and discusses the implications for practice and further research. This chapter also includes a logic model that visually represents the study's theoretical propositions and practical implications. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research, aiming to contribute to the field of educational leadership and enhance crisis communication strategies in PK-12 public school districts.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, I examined crisis management decision-making practices through the lived experiences of PK-12 public school district leaders. To anchor this study in a robust academic foundation, I conducted a comprehensive review of current literature focusing on decision-making, crisis management, communication, and systems leadership. This literature review entailed a comprehensive search and analysis of peer-reviewed scholarly studies and relevant literature from various data sources. The search produced a substantial collection of resources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other pertinent materials that explore the complexities of crisis management and communication. This chapter aims to synthesize these findings to identify trends and gaps in the existing body of knowledge, thereby setting a solid groundwork for the study.

This chapter is structured into several key sections to systematically address the complexities of crisis management in PK-12 school districts. It begins by examining the concept of crisis within the educational context, providing a detailed analysis of various definitions and theoretical perspectives. This is followed by an exploration of crisis planning and management strategies in PK-12 schools, highlighting the evolution of these strategies and the current challenges faced in their implementation.

Subsequent sections focus on the critical role of communication in crisis situations, analyzing the importance of effective communication strategies and the resources used for communication in PK-12 school districts. The review then shifts to examine crisis communication specifically, discussing the applicability and limitations of existing models like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Crisis and Emergency Risk

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Communication (CERC) framework within the educational setting. A significant portion of the chapter is dedicated to understanding the roles and responsibilities of school district leaders during crises. This includes an in-depth examination of the presence and impact of communications leaders in school districts, the evolving role of superintendents in crisis communication, and the long-term impacts and recovery processes following a crisis.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the conceptual framework guiding the study, primarily focusing on Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model. This model provides a lens for analyzing leadership decisions and actions during crises, offering insights into how different leadership frames influence crisis management and communication. By thoroughly reviewing these key areas, I aimed to establish a comprehensive understanding of the current state of crisis management and communication in PK-12 public school districts, setting the stage for the following investigation.

PK-12 School District Crisis Planning and Management

PK-12 public schools are responsible for providing safe and healthy environments for children while upholding stakeholder confidence in the public education system. To accomplish this, it is crucial for PK-12 public school districts to implement effective crisis management plans. These plans are vital for preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from crisis events. This section includes sub-sections on "Crisis Defined" and "Crisis Planning in Education" to provide a comprehensive understanding of these concepts.

Crisis Defined

I elected to use Coombs's (2023) definition of a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders regarding health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can significantly impact an organization's

performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2023, p.4). While this definition accurately captures the scope of events that can qualify as crises, it does not encompass the range of crises affecting public education systems. Weick (1988) provided an early definition, describing a crisis as "a low probability/high consequence event that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization" (Weick, 1988, p. 305). These definitions frame crises as events perceived to jeopardize critical stakeholder expectations and organizational performance. However, they do not fully address the broad spectrum of scenarios that can constitute a crisis within the public education context.

The literature has yet to widely define what constitutes a school-based crisis. Most studies on school crises utilize definitions from non-educational fields, focusing on severe acts of violence, disasters, or other threats to the physical safety of students, staff, or infrastructure. Pepper et al. (2010) proposed a comprehensive theory of crisis in education, which includes three interconnected components:

1. A school crisis is an event or series of events that threaten the core values or critical functions of schools.
2. A school crisis becomes apparent when it publicly surfaces, though it often stems from complex, ambiguous, or unpredictable circumstances.
3. A school crisis necessitates immediate decision-making (p.6).

Pepper et al. (2010) also argued that the term crisis is overused in the education sector, emphasizing the importance of differentiating between routine school or district challenges and genuine crises.

By its very nature, a crisis has the potential to bring significant negative impacts to an organization within a short period. Crisis management and effective communication during

crises are essential skills for school district leaders. However, the strategies that work in one district or school may differ significantly from those effective in another. Seeger (2006) warned against assuming that best practices in crisis communication apply universally across different types of organizations, stressing the importance of understanding specific contexts and situations. Crises are unique events that generate high levels of uncertainty, affecting an organization's management, employees, stakeholders, and surrounding community. Defined as "an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholders' interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis" (Millar & Heath, 2003, p. 2), crises occur across all industries, social contexts, and organizational structures. Although generally unexpected and disruptive, crises will remain an ever-present constant occurrence.

Crisis Planning in Education

PK-12 school leaders utilize crisis management plans, also known as emergency plans, to effectively respond to crises, regardless of their nature, by following standardized and practical procedures. Given the multitude of potential crises that schools may encounter, the emergency plans are designed to be broad in scope and capable of addressing a wide range of disasters. These plans are essential for ensuring that schools are prepared to handle various types of emergencies systematically.

A crucial element in effectively addressing a crisis is a leader's ability to promptly recognize the leadership challenge surrounding the issue and develop a strategy for responding (Liu et al., 2022). Crisis planning in PK-12 schools has evolved significantly over recent decades. Historically, school safety plans were primarily focused on natural disasters and fire drills. However, the rise in school violence and other crises, such as public health emergencies, has necessitated a broader approach. Brock et al. (2016) highlighted the shift towards more

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comprehensive crisis management plans that encompass a variety of potential risks. This evolution underscores school leaders' need to be adaptable and forward-thinking in their crisis-planning efforts.

The development and assessment of school crisis plans are critical components of a school's overall preparedness strategy. Baran and Alderman (2010) referred to the development and assessment of school crisis plans as the protocol for coordinating and implementing resources when facing catastrophic decision-making events. Lopez et al. (2020) underscored the importance of developing crisis plans that are not only reactive but also proactive in nature. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) offers a standardized approach to crisis management, emphasizing preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation (FEMA, 2018). By adhering to these guidelines, schools can enhance their readiness and resilience in the face of various crises.

Despite these frameworks, Bradshaw et al. (2022) found that many school districts struggle with the implementation of comprehensive crisis plans. Challenges include budget constraints, lack of training, and the diverse nature of crises that schools might face. This evolution in crisis planning underscores the necessity for PK-12 school leaders to be versatile and forward-thinking, equipping themselves not only with the ability to respond to immediate crises but also to anticipate and prepare for a range of potential future scenarios. The adaptability and thoroughness of these plans are critical, as they must address not just the logistical aspects of crisis management but also consider the impacts on the school community. Therefore, while standardized frameworks like NIMS provide a foundational structure, the effective implementation of crisis plans in schools demands tailored approaches that reflect the unique needs and challenges of each educational environment.

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A school district's preparedness for responding to crisis incidents starts with planning for the unthinkable to occur in PK-12 schools. This foundational planning is crucial for ensuring that schools can effectively manage crises when they arise. The state of readiness of school personnel depends on the planning, preparation, and training provided by school leaders to staff and students (Gainey, 2010).

Gainey (2009) conducted two studies on crisis management in public school districts in South Carolina and Georgia. One study focused on determining the extent to which South Carolina school districts were crisis ready. The second study, conducted in metropolitan Atlanta school districts, investigated how these districts involved the public and employed both traditional and contemporary media strategies to communicate crisis management plans. Using surveys, Gainey assessed the categories covered in school crisis management plans and the extent of the schools' crisis readiness. This research underscores the importance of comprehensive preparedness and communication strategies in effective crisis management.

According to Gainey (2010), recent incidents in schools highlight the necessity of further research to gain insight into the phenomenon of school violence. Gainey (2009) defined crisis readiness as being prepared to respond to potential crises through formal plans, communication that builds relationships with stakeholders within the school district and the broader community, and providing effective leadership. Bradshaw et al. (2022) emphasized that ongoing training for all school staff, extending beyond select members to the entire school staff and threat assessment teams, will better prepare schools for crisis events. This continuous training and preparation are essential for maintaining a high level of readiness in the face of potential crises.

Communication was a focal point of the Gainey (2009) study's recommendations, suggesting that schools consider establishing advisory communities to involve outside

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stakeholders, evaluating current systems in place, including methods of communicating and articulating responsibilities in a potential crisis, involving the public relations practitioner.

Gainey (2009) expanded on the final recommendation about involving the public relations staff and asserted that a district that limits the involvement of that role is simultaneously limiting its ability to manage crises effectively. An individual may be designated with the responsibility of communicating with stakeholders and the media; however, typically, there is a lack of specific protocols or instructions on how they should perform this role.

Grissom and Condon (2021) emphasize that, beyond following a structured crisis management plan, school leaders must possess key competencies to handle crises effectively. These essential skills include communication, analysis, sense-making, judgment, and emotional intelligence. To navigate a crisis successfully, school leaders must engage in continuous information gathering, which aids in preparation, response, and post-crisis learning. Effective communication is vital during a crisis, making it imperative to establish robust communication systems in advance. These systems ensure that the community is well-informed in advance about the protocols for receiving updates during a crisis, including the timing, locations, and methods of communication.

In transitioning to the topic of crisis communication within PK-12 school districts, it is evident that communication is not just a component of crisis management but a pivotal element that underpins the entire process, influencing how effectively a school district navigates through and emerges from a crisis situation. This next section will delve deeper into the specifics of crisis communication within PK-12 settings, exploring how school districts communicate during crises and the impact of these communication strategies on overall crisis management.

Crisis Communication in PK-12 School Districts

In the realm of PK-12 public school districts, crisis communication emerges as a critical aspect that significantly influences the effectiveness of crisis management. This section delves into the intricacies of crisis communication within these educational settings, underscoring the importance of effective communication strategies. It examines how local school districts are perceived by the public and the impact of these perceptions on the overall trust and confidence in the education system. The focus here is to explore how crisis communication can either mitigate or exacerbate the challenges faced during crises and the role of school administrators in shaping these communication efforts.

Importance of Effective Communication

Local school districts often receive more favorable perceptions from the public compared to state or national education systems. According to the 54th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools (2022), 72% of public-school parents trust and have confidence in their community's teachers, but this trust decreases to 63% among all adults in the community. Additionally, the percentage of public school parents giving their children's schools A or B grades has slightly declined from 75% in 2019 to 68%. This disparity in perception becomes even more pronounced when considering the nation's schools as a whole, which receive lower ratings from both public school parents and the general adult population.

People tend to give higher ratings to the schools they are familiar with than to those they hear about in the news. As the perception of public education continues to decline, district leaders and school administrators must adopt strategies from the business sector to market their schools and take responsibility for introducing and implementing positive changes through effective communication.

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This discrepancy in perceptions underscores the importance of effective communication, particularly in times of crisis. As Edwards (2016) points out, timely and accurate communication can significantly mitigate the negative impacts of a crisis. However, schools often encounter obstacles in quickly and effectively disseminating information to all stakeholders. The challenge for school administrators is to continually enhance stakeholder communication, thereby building positive relationships that improve the support and perception of the school district. Despite the critical nature of this task, effective communication is often assumed to be a universal skill, leading to underinvestment in public relations efforts (Kowalski, 2006, 2011). In some cases, inadequate or inconsistent communication has even led to negative performance reviews and termination of administrators and superintendents (Davis, 2000). Therefore, it is essential for school leaders to prioritize and continuously improve their communication strategies to effectively address the unique needs of their communities.

In conclusion, as public perception of education continues to evolve, it becomes imperative for district leaders and school administrators to adopt strategic communication methods, drawing inspiration from business sector practices. This approach involves taking ownership of the responsibility to introduce and implement positive changes through effective communication, thereby enhancing the reputation and effectiveness of their schools, especially in times of crisis.

Resources Used to Communicate

In the complex landscape of PK-12 school districts, the ability to communicate effectively, especially during crises, requires utilizing diverse and robust resources and structures

that facilitate the exchange of information and engagement. These mechanisms play a crucial role in conveying critical information, fostering trust, and building a sense of community during both normal operations and crises. In times of crisis within a school district, effective communication becomes crucial to ensure the safety and well-being of students, staff, and the community at large. School districts typically utilize various resources, structures, and communication practices to disseminate information and address concerns during such situations.

The Role of Technological Advancements. Technological advancements have significantly enhanced the scope and efficiency of communication between schools and homes, playing a critical role in fostering successful school-home partnerships. These tools provide various methods to keep parents informed and engaged in their children's education. Moreover, they enable real-time updates and interactive platforms that facilitate ongoing dialogue and collaboration between educators and families.

The evolution of technology has markedly enhanced the scope and efficiency of communication between schools and homes. Tools like emails facilitate regular, asynchronous interactions between teachers and parents, significantly developing successful school-home partnerships (Epstein, 2019; Heath et al., 2015). The new technologies that provide convenience, efficiency, and effectiveness are important in developing parent-school communication (Zieger & Tan, 2012). Parents are now required to navigate various communication methods, such as school websites, e-mail updates, phone calls home, and traditional backpack letters. Early web-based technologies, like e-mail and online grade books, increased the information available to parents. Recent technological advancements offer various new media platforms to enhance communication methods and foster greater parental involvement and knowledge by facilitating

improved coordination and communication between schools, school districts, and families (Kraft & Bolves, 2022). These advancements highlight the dynamic nature of communication in educational settings.

While new technological communication methods can expedite information sharing, the lack of access to technology can hinder communication opportunities. Heath et al. (2015) emphasize that selecting the right communication technology is vital for enhancing school and home communication efficiency and fostering parental involvement. However, societal shifts due to technological advancements have introduced new barriers. Many individuals now rely solely on cell phones, which can have expiring contracts, pay-as-you-go options, and frequent number changes, leading to disconnected numbers and returned letters. This makes it increasingly difficult for schools to maintain contact with parents (Lavergne, 2017). As a result, traditional communication methods have become less effective, underscoring the need for adaptable and varied communication strategies.

In Lavergne's (2017) study, school district leaders identified internet platforms, particularly social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, as the most reliable methods for communicating with families. This study highlights the necessity for school districts to continually reassess and update their communication strategies to effectively reach all families. Regular evaluation and adaptation of communication methods are crucial for maintaining effective and inclusive communication channels.

The Impact of Social Media. The emergence of social media platforms such as "X" (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram has significantly transformed district-community communication dynamics. These platforms offer the ability to instantly connect with a wide audience, bringing a new dimension to how information is shared and

received. However, this rapid dissemination capability presents its own set of challenges. As Liu et al. (2016) observed, while social media can be a powerful tool for spreading information, it can also be a conduit for the rapid spread of misinformation and rumors. This necessitates a heightened focus on ensuring the accuracy of shared information and rigorous fact-checking.

In the context of crisis communication, the role of social media becomes even more critical. Crises, often characterized by high levels of uncertainty, as Seeger (2006) noted, can lead to a scramble for information. This urgency, coupled with the nature of social media, can sometimes result in the propagation of misinformation. Page et al. (2019) found in their study that a significant majority (88%) of school districts did not have a dedicated strategy for managing social media communications during crises, highlighting a crucial area for improvement in crisis preparedness.

Furthermore, the role of official websites and active social media accounts extends beyond mere information dissemination. As Sheninger (2019) conveyed, these digital platforms have evolved from simple information portals to vibrant, interactive spaces where communities can engage, learn, and connect. They serve as central hubs for sharing news, updates, events, and resources, pivotal in shaping the public's perception and engagement with the school district.

In reference to schools, social media, in particular, enables real-time interactions and engagement with community members. Cox and McLeod (2014) detail that understanding how to use social media to communicate with students and stakeholders is no longer an optional activity for school leaders. Using social media to communicate provides a level of transparency that provides parents and others with the background and context for school and school district activities throughout the year. Sheninger (2019) suggested that school districts utilizing social

media experienced improved communication effectiveness and increased community involvement.

According to Neely and Collins (2018), research shows that larger cities with younger, more educated populations are more likely to adopt social media platforms for crisis communications, while organizations representing historically underserved populations are less likely to do so. As public school districts serve a wide range of stakeholders, it is critical to maintain that face-to-face communication remains essential. Regular community meetings, town halls, and public forums allow district representatives to engage directly with community members, address concerns, and gather feedback. These interactions contribute to transparency and accountability in decision-making and communication processes.

In essence, the integration of social media into district-community communications is a double-edged sword, offering unparalleled opportunities for engagement and challenges in maintaining information accuracy and integrity. As such, school district leaders must approach their social media strategies with a balanced and strategic mindset, ensuring they harness its benefits while mitigating its risks, especially in times of crisis. These strategies involve continuous monitoring of social media channels, promptly addressing misinformation, and ensuring consistent messaging across all platforms. Additionally, training staff on effective social media use and establishing clear guidelines can help maintain the integrity of information shared online.

The Necessity of Direct Communication. Effective crisis management and communication require a multifaceted approach that balances digital and direct communication methods. While digital platforms offer speed and convenience, direct communication remains crucial for building trust and ensuring clarity. Direct communication allows for personal

interactions, which are essential for addressing specific concerns and fostering a deeper connection with the community.

Despite the increasing reliance on digital platforms, the importance of direct, face-to-face communication remains paramount. Many districts have adopted mobile applications or alert systems to quickly notify community members about emergencies, closures, and other essential updates. These platforms offer a direct and efficient way to reach a large audience promptly. These automated systems can send out alerts via text messages, emails, phone calls, and social media platforms, facilitating the rapid dissemination of critical information to parents, staff, and the community. However, these technological solutions should complement, not replace, traditional methods of communication.

Community meetings and forums also serve as crucial platforms for face-to-face communication. Town hall meetings, parent-teacher association gatherings, and other events allow district leaders to address concerns and answer questions from the community directly (Seeger, 2006). These interactions provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue, allowing leaders to engage with stakeholders on a personal level and address specific concerns. Moreover, face-to-face interactions help build trust and ensure that messages are understood as intended, reducing the risk of miscommunication that can occur with digital methods.

Balancing digital and direct communication methods ensures that all community members receive timely and accurate information, fostering a sense of trust and collaboration. This comprehensive approach is essential for effective crisis management and maintaining strong relationships within the school community. By integrating both methods, school districts can create a robust communication strategy that meets the diverse needs of their stakeholders, ensuring that no one is left uninformed or disconnected during critical times.

Media Relations. Establishing and maintaining effective media relations is a vital aspect of a school district's communication strategy. By leveraging media channels, districts can disseminate important information quickly and accurately to a broad audience. School districts often establish relationships with local media outlets to share information with a wider audience. Through press releases, press conferences, and interviews, districts can communicate important developments and provide accurate information to the public. These practices provide a stronger chance that the district's message reaches a larger community, enhancing transparency and trust.

Bernstein (2018) noted that, in times of crisis, it is critical for the spokesperson of the organization to have training to effectively be able to face the media. Proper training ensures the spokesperson can handle media inquiries with confidence, clarity, and composure, thereby maintaining the district's credibility and public trust during critical times. Effective media relations not only help in managing the flow of information but also play a crucial role in shaping the public's perception of the district's handling of crises. This underscores the importance of having a well-prepared media strategy and trained personnel to represent the district effectively.

Internal Communication Structures. Internally, effective communication channels ensure that all school personnel are informed and aligned. This involves using email systems, internal messaging platforms, and staff meetings to keep teachers and staff members up to date on the latest developments. These communication resources and structures collectively enable school districts to manage communication effectively. These resources and structures collectively form the backbone of effective communication in PK-12 school districts. From technological advancements to social media, face-to-face interactions, emergency alert systems, and media relations, each component plays a vital role in building trust, fostering a sense of community, and

ensuring the safety and well-being of students, staff, and the broader community, especially in times of crisis.

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication involves the collection, processing, and dissemination of information during a crisis event. In school districts, effective communication with the community serves as a crucial link between local authorities and residents, ensuring timely and accurate information transmission. Communication is a vital aspect of crisis planning and management. PK-12 public schools need to have comprehensive and flexible crisis response plans that incorporate strategies for keeping staff and families informed during a crisis. The role of communication leaders becomes even more vital during crises, as communities seek guidance and support. For example, Morsut et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of transparent and consistent communication in building community resilience during natural disasters, highlighting how stakeholders rely on organizations to mobilize resources, provide information, and make critical decisions. Despite the significant number of studies related to crisis management in the private sector, literature addressing crises within public schools and their communities remains limited. This gap underscores the need for more research focused on effective crisis communication strategies in educational settings.

The current literature on crisis communication is predominantly found in public relations, communications, crisis management, and business journals. Research has also focused on business organizations, governmental agencies, and higher education institutions. However, crisis management and crisis communication within the PK–12 public school setting have received relatively little attention (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Mazer et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017b). This limited focus has resulted in significant gaps in understanding the specific

approaches, processes, and concepts necessary for effective crisis communication in school districts. To better prepare school districts for future crises, researchers have a responsibility to continue exploring this area (Coombs, 2007). Given the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and families, effective communication with stakeholders has become more critical than ever. It is essential for school and district leaders to be well-versed in the fundamentals of effective communication and crisis management to navigate these challenges successfully.

Effective communication during crises involves various types of communication channels. Marsen (2020) stated that these include official announcements, press releases, public service announcements, community meetings, and social media platforms. These channels allow authorities to provide essential information, address concerns, and offer guidance to the community. The existing body of literature on crisis communication primarily emphasizes the importance of an organization's reputation but overlooks its provision of instructional and adaptive information (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Instructive information provides guidance to stakeholders on how to respond and the necessary measures to safeguard themselves, whereas adjustive information aids stakeholders in handling uncertainty (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

The approaches that school districts and leaders have taken to respond to crises have been well documented (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Mazer et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017b; Trust et al., 2020). However, K–12 school districts' social media-based communications, particularly their crisis responses, have been previously investigated primarily about school shootings (Mazer et al., 2015; Payne et al., 2018). Coombs (2014) shared that social media has become the “driving force in the bleeding edge of crisis communication” (p. 7), meaning that social media use, or the lack of understanding and preparation for using social media when responding to

crises, is at high risk of being unreliable. In Thompson et al. (2017b), the crisis team members interviewed identified social media as a significant challenge and resolved that schools were inadequately prepared to deal with this challenge.

The emergence of digital platforms such as district and school websites, social media accounts, and mass communications platforms has transformed the landscape of crisis communication. Smith and Riley (2012) emphasized the importance of open, two-way communication throughout a crisis. Open communication ensures that maximum information for decision-making is available, misinformation is minimized, and uncertainty and confusion among stakeholders are limited. In the context of crisis communication, institutions should prioritize the goal of reducing uncertainty among their stakeholders to the best of their abilities. According to Reynolds and Seeger (2005), while addressing the communication challenges that arise during a crisis, it is crucial to prioritize the prompt reduction of uncertainty. This focus enables the audience to understand the situation at hand, therefore facilitating appropriate actions.

Theoretical Frameworks in Crisis Communication. In this literature review, while the primary focus of the larger study is structured around Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, it is pertinent to include a brief explanation of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) framework. The inclusion of this theory and framework is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, both SCCT and CERC have been instrumental in guiding organizations, predominantly in the private sector, through crisis navigation and management. Their inclusion provides a comprehensive background and contextual understanding of established methodologies in crisis communication. Secondly, by examining these frameworks, the review acknowledges and contrasts the different approaches and strategies

traditionally employed in crisis management, enriching the study's perspective. This exploration also serves to highlight the gap in the literature regarding the application of such frameworks in the unique context of PK-12 public school districts. Although SCCT and CERC are not the central frameworks of the more extensive study, understanding their principles and applications offers valuable insights into the evolution of crisis management theories and practices, setting a foundational backdrop against which Bolman and Deal's model can be further appreciated and applied in the educational sector.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), conceived by Coombs (2023), offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending how organizations shape their communication strategies in preparation for and during crises. This theory emphasizes the necessity of adapting communication approaches in alignment with the specifics of each crisis event and the range of stakeholders implicated. SCCT evaluates the crisis type, crisis history, and prior relationship reputation to predict the level of reputational threat to the organization and how stakeholders perceive the crisis and where they attribute crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2023). This theory serves as a blueprint for dissecting organizations' responses to crises and the resulting effects on stakeholders' perceptions. The SCCT framework has been widely used in numerous studies on crisis communication, as it categorizes different types of crises and provides communication strategies based on attributions of crisis responsibility and reputation considerations.

Page (2019), Fisher and Hopp (2020), and Im et al. (2021) are among recent researchers who have begun to assemble a body of research that functionalizes elements of SCCT, creating hypothetical scenarios that test the success of the framework and messaging employing its guidelines. A recent work by Boman et al. (2023) utilized SCCT to examine the influence of

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organizational crisis responses on the perception of messages. When applied to research, SCCT can be a guiding framework for investigating the multifaceted arena of communication strategies, stakeholders' attributions of accountability, and the resulting impacts on community opinions, particularly in the context of school districts contending with communication during crisis events.

No matter who delivers the crisis communication, Coombs (2023) emphasized that stakeholders need specific types of information beyond the traditional organization-focused, damage-control strategies. School districts should offer both instructing and adjusting information. Instructing information advises stakeholders on how to respond and what actions to take for their safety, while adjusting information assists stakeholders in managing uncertainty and coping with the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) framework emphasizes the importance of communicating in a timely, accurate, and empathic manner. It is based on a blend of risk, crisis, and health communication ideas. Its foundation contains six key communication rules: being the first to provide information, ensuring accuracy, building credibility, demonstrating sincere empathy, motivating action, and showing respect. This framework has found notable application in numerous studies on public health crises, including disease outbreaks and natural disasters. A case in point is the work of Reynolds and Seeger (2005), in which CERC principles were employed to dissect communication dynamics during the SARS outbreak. However, its application in the unique context of PK-12 education has been explored less.

COVID-19 complications

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges, necessitating the rapid development and implementation of innovative communication strategies across various sectors. These adaptations were critical in maintaining engagement and disseminating crucial information during a period of significant disruption. Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted agencies at all levels to adopt innovative communication strategies. For government agencies, virtual town hall meetings, online Q&A sessions with experts, website hubs, and interactive webinars emerged as effective ways to engage the community and provide information while adhering to social distancing measures. These approaches addressed concerns and fostered a sense of unity and solidarity (Neely & Collins, 2018). The pandemic resulted in a historic shutdown of schools, necessitating educational institutions to quickly adapt and move to alternative methods of teaching (Geiger & Dawson, 2020; Gross, 2021; Peterson et al., 2020). This rapid shift underscored the importance of flexibility and innovation in educational communication strategies.

Although school leaders may have had crisis management plans in place, addressing a pandemic presented challenges that public schools had not had to respond to in recent history. School leaders had to make decisions to manage this crisis, which directly affected the health and welfare of staff, students, and the greater school district community, often at the mercy of government officials or important stakeholders (Birnbaum, 2020). Pandemics, according to Birnbaum's (2020) study, are a "type of black swan event which is characterized as rare, unimaginable, of large magnitude, and rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight" (p. 4). This characterization highlights the unpredictability and complexity of managing such crises.

A pandemic can create circumstances likened to other unpredictable events such as school shootings, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters, all of which have caused crisis management in public schools to evolve in recent decades to focus on preparedness, response, and recovery (Birnbaum, 2020). For varying lengths of time, the COVID-19 pandemic converted school leaders into crisis leaders in the United States and worldwide. Due to COVID-19, “a new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times that will possibly overtake and overshadow all that was written before on the topic” (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 246). This emphasizes the need for continuous learning and adaptation in school leadership to effectively navigate future crises.

In times of crisis, public agencies and emergency management departments increasingly utilize social media platforms to communicate with the public. These platforms enable rapid dissemination of information, ensuring that communities are kept informed about the latest developments and necessary precautions. Research by Neely and Collins (2018) highlighted how local and state governments leveraged social media to provide real-time updates on the pandemic, shared preventive measures, and countered misinformation. This proactive communication approach helps build trust within the community, as accurate and timely information is crucial during crises (2018). The integration of social media into crisis communication strategies allows for a two-way interaction, where public agencies can also receive feedback and address concerns from the community, further enhancing the effectiveness of their communication efforts.

Effective communications are essential in crisis management, ensuring the dissemination of accurate information and promoting community resilience. The evolution of communication channels, fueled by social media and magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has reshaped how

decision-makers engage with the public. The impact of COVID-19 forced school leaders to redefine their roles and the overarching role of communication for their communities. While challenges such as misinformation persist, district-community communications have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience in dealing with unprecedented crises through the implementation of innovative strategies.

School District Crisis Leadership

In exploring the multifaceted nature of crisis management within PK-12 public school districts, a crucial element that emerges is the role of leadership. Leadership in this context transcends traditional administrative responsibilities, delving into crisis preparedness, response, communication, and recovery. During times of crisis, school communities must have a resilient and committed leader who can provide optimism, hope, and honesty in their communication. This will instill confidence in community members that the school leaders will effectively guide them through the crisis (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). This section examines existing literature that sheds light on the leadership roles within PK-12 public school districts during crises, aiming to understand how these roles adapt and evolve in response to various crises.

Understanding Leadership Roles

Effective leadership in crisis management requires a deep understanding of information management and communication strategies. These core activities are essential for maintaining organizational stability and trust, especially during challenging times. Leaders in schools and districts must be familiar with the fundamentals of effective communication and crisis management. While there is substantial research on crisis management and communication, studies focusing on the role of school district leaders, particularly superintendents and communication leaders, during crises are sparse. Leadership in these contexts involves unique

challenges, given the diverse and vulnerable demographic of stakeholders involved (Harris & Jones, 2020). Recognizing these unique challenges is essential for developing effective leadership strategies in educational settings.

In smaller districts, the superintendent typically takes on the role of communicator, addressing information and public relations needs. In contrast, larger districts usually have central office staff dedicated to public relations and communications, although these teams tend to be small. The structures and practices for managing crisis communication can differ significantly from one district to another, regardless of size. Research has indicated that crisis communication is most effective when delivered by a designated spokesperson, such as the superintendent or a communications leader (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Roshan et al., 2016). Effective crisis communication relies on the spokesperson's ability to convey empathy and concern (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Zdziarski, 2016). These findings underscore the critical role of a knowledgeable and empathetic spokesperson in managing crises.

Understanding leadership roles is critical for comprehending the varied and dynamic ways school leaders respond to and manage crises within their districts. This understanding enables the development of tailored crisis management strategies that address the specific needs and contexts of different school districts, ensuring that leaders can effectively support their communities during times of crisis.

Presence of a Communications Leader

One key resource is the presence of a dedicated communications leader who serves as a central point of contact for all communication-related activities during crises. The role and

responsibility of the communications leader varies across the nation. Communications leaders in school districts play a multifaceted role that extends far beyond mere information dissemination. They are responsible for crafting and executing communication strategies that align with the district's goals and values. They serve as key liaisons between the school district and its various stakeholders, including students, parents, staff, and the broader community. Their duties encompass managing public relations, overseeing internal and external communications, and handling media relations. Moreover, they play a critical role in crisis situations, where they are tasked with providing timely and accurate information, managing the district's image, and ensuring transparent communication channels during emergencies.

Communications leaders also engage in proactive community relations, fostering partnerships and building trust within the community. Their strategic communication efforts are instrumental in shaping the school district's public perception and maintaining a positive and cohesive educational environment. The communications leader is responsible for crafting and distributing official statements, updates, and press releases, ensuring consistent and accurate information reaches the community. The communications leader often acts as a presentation writer or ghostwriter for the superintendent or other high-level administrators. The presence or absence of a communications leader can significantly impact the communication strategies employed by a school district.

In school districts, the personnel in these roles have various names, including public information officers (PIOs), communications directors, communications officers, public relations directors, and even marketing directors. Kowalski (2011) stated that public relations is arguably one of the most recognized dimensions of school organizational administration but is the least understood. School districts can benefit from a well-planned public relations program even in the

best of times. In challenging times, the stakes are higher because the stability or status of schools is threatened. Whether this threat comes from within the schools or from the wider environment, individuals are positioned and expected to protect the institution's well-being and its stakeholders' interests (Morsut et al., 2022). Effective communication strategies are essential for disseminating accurate information, fostering trust, and coordinating efforts to mitigate the impact of crises (Im et al., 2021). With the rise of social media and the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape of district-community communications has evolved significantly.

The communications leader serves as the primary point of contact for disseminating official information to the community and media. In districts with a dedicated communications leader, there is a marked efficiency in responding to crisis situations, which significantly bolsters community trust and perception. Conversely, districts lacking a dedicated role often face challenges maintaining coordinated and centralized communication efforts. This absence can result in messaging inconsistencies and delays in addressing community queries, as leaders are compelled to split their focus between managing the crisis and handling communication duties. The communications leader coordinates press releases, handles media inquiries, and manages communication strategies.

Seeger (2006) emphasized the proactive nature of effective communication, stating, "If communication issues are only considered after the fact, the effectiveness of crisis communication is typically reduced" (p. 237). This underscores the need for timely and anticipatory communication strategies. Similarly, Reynolds (2006) highlighted the interplay between operational responses and communication during crises: "A good operational response to a crisis can be devastated by poor crisis communication; in contrast, good crisis

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communication cannot compensate for truly bad operational responses” (p. 249). These insights collectively illustrate the critical role of communications leaders in not just disseminating information but in shaping the narrative and outcomes of crisis management in school districts.

A 2022 survey conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) asked 2,800 members to detail the day-to-day types of responsibilities for a communications leader. The survey revealed a wide range of tasks, with crisis communications being the most prevalent responsibility, reported by 58% of the respondents. This was closely followed by external communications (52%), social media management (48%), and community relations and public engagement (44%). Additionally, media relations were highlighted by 43% of the respondents, while website management and internal communications were noted as key responsibilities by 39% and 36% of the participants, respectively (NSPRA, 2023). This data underscores the multifaceted nature of the role played by communications leaders in educational environments, highlighting their integral involvement in various aspects of school communications.

The absence of a formal communication structure may result in reduced transparency, making it challenging for community members to access accurate and timely information. This can erode trust between the district and the community (Boman et al., 2023; Mazer et al., 2015). During crises, districts lacking a communications leader may face difficulties disseminating urgent information, potentially exacerbating the impact of the crisis. Quick and coordinated communication is crucial in crisis management (Lambiase & English, 2020). Districts without modern communication mechanisms may rely more heavily on traditional methods such as paper notices or word-of-mouth. While these methods still have value, they may not be as efficient or effective in reaching a broad audience, especially in the digital age.

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Additionally, the lack of a dedicated communication leader might result in reduced professionalism in messaging, potentially affecting the district's image during challenging times. It is common for communications leaders in neighboring organizations to share and coordinate messaging. For instance, when an issue occurs with a local law enforcement agency, their communications director will often contact the school district point person to ensure they share a common language with communication releases and updates during crises. The absence of a communications leader makes it more challenging to build and maintain this relationship and information sharing. The communications leader serves as a bridge between the district and the media and must have the skills to control the media narrative when dealing with different types of journalists and reporters in the region. Limited engagement with media outlets and difficulty crafting crisis-appropriate messages are common challenges in districts without a face for public relations.

Effective district-community communication is underpinned by a combination of resources and structures that facilitate information exchange and engagement. A dedicated communications leader, district websites, social media, community meetings, and alert systems contribute to transparent, efficient, and trustworthy communication. Districts lacking these mechanisms may face challenges in maintaining clear communication, transparency, and timely crisis management.

An additional role of a communications leader is to find ways to connect and market their company with its stakeholders, which is no different than what a school administrator is trying to do with their stakeholders. In a study by Curtis et al. (2010) researching how nonprofit organizations are using social media for public relations, they stated, "social media techniques will become more abundant as public relations practitioners become mindful of their

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effectiveness in regards to reaching target audiences, promoting a specific cause, and further developing communication strategies” (p. 92). Thus, the role of communications leaders in school districts aligns closely with the evolving landscape of public relations, where leveraging social media and other innovative techniques is crucial for effectively connecting with and engaging their diverse stakeholder groups, mirroring the strategic approaches employed by successful nonprofit organizations.

Concluding the discussion on the presence of a communications leader in school districts, it is evident that these professionals play an indispensable role in the fabric of school district-community relations. They are not only the primary point of contact for disseminating information but also pivotal in crafting strategies that enhance the district’s image and foster community trust. The efficacy of their role is particularly pronounced in crisis situations, where their ability to coordinate communication efforts can significantly influence the district’s capacity to manage the crisis effectively. As highlighted by Seeger (2006) and Reynolds (2006), proactive and anticipatory communication strategies are crucial for effective crisis management, and the absence of a dedicated communications leader can lead to challenges in maintaining transparency and consistency in messaging. The multifaceted responsibilities outlined in the NSPRA survey underscore the complexity and breadth of the communications leader's role, emphasizing the need for skilled professionals to navigate the diverse and dynamic landscape of school district communications. As we transition to exploring the role of the superintendent in communication, it becomes clear that leadership in school districts is an intricate balance of strategic communication, public relations, and crisis management, all of which are integral to maintaining a positive educational environment and strong community relations.

Role of Superintendent Communication

The importance of the superintendent in communication within the school district cannot be overstated, especially in the context of crisis management. Effective communication by superintendents is a cornerstone of successful crisis management in school districts. Their leadership role necessitates not only managerial skills but also the ability to influence, collaborate, and achieve common goals through clear and transparent communication.

Since the inception of public education, the roles of its leaders have evolved to adapt to changing priorities and expectations. The superintendent's role has evolved to encompass both managerial and leadership functions, which involve influencing others, collaborating effectively, and establishing and achieving common goals (Northouse, 2016). As the central figure in the district's educational leadership, the superintendent's communication skills are crucial for various stakeholders, including students, parents, staff, and the broader community. Their ability to communicate effectively is not just a desirable trait but a critical component of their leadership role. This evolution underscores the growing complexity and importance of the superintendent's communication responsibilities.

The 2020 decennial study by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) surveyed superintendents to identify the key reasons for their hiring. The most common response, given by 76.1% of participants, was personal attributes such as honesty and integrity. Additionally, 59.2% highlighted the ability to communicate with various community stakeholders, while 57.8% emphasized the importance of being an instructional leader (Tienken, 2021). These results show that the ability to communicate and display honesty and integrity is perceived as a higher necessary quality among superintendents than the ability to be an

instructional leader. This finding highlights the critical value placed on communication skills in the selection and effectiveness of superintendents.

In the early 2000s, Kowalski expanded the conceptualized role of superintendents to include being an effective communicator (2005). Schools and districts have historically been characterized by an isolated culture of teachers and administrators (Blase & Anderson, 1995). Kowalski (2005) highlighted the need for superintendents to communicate effectively due to the merging of an information-based society with increasing dissatisfaction with public education. The role requires understanding the district and community culture and climate, necessitating interpersonal communication skills to navigate the system's complexities and to listen, learn, and respond appropriately (Fusarelli, 2006). The role of a district leader as a communicator now entails engaging stakeholders in political dialogue, sharing visions, creating a positive image, garnering community support for change, and keeping the public informed (Kowalski, 2004; Learned-Miller, 2022). These evolving expectations reflect the multifaceted communication demands placed on superintendents today, emphasizing the critical importance of their communication skills in their selection and effectiveness.

Clear and timely communication is a cornerstone of crisis management for school superintendents. Edmonson (2020) emphasizes that transparency is job one for leaders during a crisis. As expectations for timely communication evolve, school districts and superintendents must continually update their communication strategies to effectively reach all families and stakeholders. A district leader's responsibilities now include fostering a positive image, rallying community support for change, and ensuring the public stays informed. Timely and transparent communication is essential in maintaining trust and guiding the school community through crises. (Learned-Miller, 2022). Although there may be a tendency to move quickly during a

crisis, it is crucial for leaders to allocate time for open communication (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Prioritizing transparency is vital for maintaining trust and guiding the school community through challenging times. This dedication to clear and honest communication helps to build and sustain confidence among all stakeholders.

Abrams (2020) highlighted the importance of clear communication, honesty, transparency, and preparedness as key elements of effective leadership in times of crisis. Leaders must be introspective and acknowledge their own emotional responses during a crisis, understanding how these emotions can influence their decision-making. This self-awareness is critical due to the urgent nature of crises and the need for swift, decisive actions. Bolman and Deal (2021) encapsulated this sentiment by stating, "In times of crisis, we expect leadership from people in high places, and we are grievously disappointed if they fail to provide it" (p. 356). In the context of a school, this responsibility falls heavily on the shoulders of the superintendent, who is looked upon by the school community for guidance and decisive solutions amidst the crisis. The superintendent's role in communication is thus integral to effective crisis management and leadership in educational settings.

Long-Term Impact and Recovery

Existing research regarding crises in the PK-12 education environment largely focuses on immediate crisis response, with less emphasis on long-term recovery and impact assessment (Lopez et al., 2020). Understanding how school districts navigate the aftermath of a crisis, including ongoing communication and policy adjustments, is crucial. Since the 1999 crisis at Columbine High School and 2018, school shootings have impacted over 187,000 students at more than 193 schools in the United States (Cox & Rich, 2018). From 2018 to May 30, 2023, the CNN school shootings database documented 384 additional incidents (Matthews, 2023). As a

result, the way public schools handle crises has significantly changed. Research indicates that leaders often fail to recognize the importance of communication until after a crisis event, such as a shooting, occurs, resulting in a lack of readiness for crisis communication (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Mazer et al., 2015). Safety issues like school shootings and other significant crises occur regularly in educational organizations at all levels. The preparedness, or lack thereof, for communication is evident to stakeholders as mass media covers these events. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research directly discussing crisis planning, crisis management, or crisis leadership from a communication standpoint.

Conceptual Framework

Investigating the role of communication during crises requires a solid framework to guide the research design and analysis. Researchers often utilize theory to explain behavior and attitudes broadly, apply it as a theoretical lens or perspective, or consider it as an endpoint (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I adopted a constructivist worldview as the foundational framework. Creswell (2014) noted that "constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" and "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (p. 8). Constructivist researchers aim to gather and comprehend participants' perspectives and then interpret these to develop a theory or uncover patterns of meaning.

Qualitative methodology in research is frequently linked to a constructivist perspective (Creswell, 2014). This approach centers on understanding the meanings that people construct, characterized by a focus on process, comprehension, or significance. Qualitative research typically involves the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, employs an inductive process, and results in a richly descriptive product (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015). For this research study, a specific type of qualitative research was chosen: multi-case study design.

In the social constructionist tradition, I incorporated context-dependent inquiry (interviews) and inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2014) to develop the cases. According to the social constructionist view, we are already a part of the social and traditional institutions that came before us and from which we create meaning (Crotty, 1998). Communities and the school districts that serve these communities have developed structures and strategies based on their perceived realities, which shape the expectations for communication within these districts.

Rural School Leadership

Rural school districts often face unique challenges and opportunities that differ from their urban counterparts. These may include limited access to resources, a closer-knit community, and different stakeholder expectations and needs. In such environments, the role of school leaders can be more multifaceted, as they might need to navigate tighter community relations, address resource constraints, and tailor their communication strategies to a smaller, perhaps more interconnected audience. Moreover, the rural setting can influence the way information is disseminated and received. For example, the reliance on local networks for information sharing, the potential lack of immediate access to advanced technological infrastructure, and the importance of face-to-face interactions in smaller communities can all impact how leaders communicate during crises.

The study focused on four rural school districts in the southeastern region of the United States. Although the investigation did not center on rurality as the main characteristic, it was considered an aspect of the decision-making environment. The study was influenced by the rural South Carolina school districts' setting, which impacted the strategies used by leaders in crisis

management and crisis communication. Understanding how the rural context affected leadership and communication strategies in crisis situations provided valuable insights and contributed to the depth and relevance of the study's findings in the broader field of educational leadership and crisis management.

Theoretical Perspective

The constructivist conceptual framework, which guides this study by focusing on understanding participants' perspectives and developing patterns of meaning, offers a framework to structure the study. Selecting an appropriate theoretical framework from an existing theory in literature for research is an important and necessary process when designing a study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Applying a theory to the study will emphasize significant facets of communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis. Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, which examines organizational issues through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses, will be applied to provide a comprehensive understanding of these factors.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model

Every organization has its distinct origins and specific circumstances that shape its structure over time. This concept applies equally to a public school system. In most communities, the school system serves as a common thread connecting a majority of stakeholders—whether as students, parents, or taxpayers. Some stakeholders may even experience all these roles. The school organization serves as a central institution that ties the community together. The collective involvement of students, families, and various community stakeholders introduces a unique and complex array of factors. Analyzing such a complicated

system during and after a crisis requires the “ability to think about situations in more than one angle so that you can develop alternative strategies” (Bolman & Deal, 2021, p. 5).

Bolman and Deal (2021) argued that leaders can understand and navigate complex organizational dynamics by viewing them through four distinct frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. A multi-faceted approach such as this is crucial for effectively managing crises, as it allows leaders to consider various aspects of the organization and its environment. This research is an examination of how superintendents use Bolman and Deal’s (2017) four leadership frames in their decision-making process. Bolman and Deal’s four-frame model, introduced in 1984, is grounded in sociology, psychology, political science, and anthropology, as well as their work with thousands of leaders. The multi-frame perspective of Bolman and Deal provides a window to view a leader's response to a crisis involving a school district and its surrounding community. Their work is a widely accepted method of organizational analysis for leaders and a resource for programs of study in educational institutions.

Reframing an institution's organizational framework involves aligning the structure of the organization with its objectives in order to enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. Bolman and Deal (2021) stated that the structure of an organization is the blueprint for meeting its strategic goals. When applied to an educational school system, the structure of the system provides the foundation for communication patterns and expectations among internal (administrators, faculty, and staff) and external (taxpayers, parents, non-parents, and community) stakeholders.

Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model allows leaders to comprehensively understand organizational issues by examining them from four different perspectives. This approach to reframing organizations aims to prevent inefficiencies that may arise when leaders adopt only

their own frame of reference, otherwise known as a leader’s habitual frame (Bolman & Deal, 2021). The four frames outlined by Bolman and Deal are: 1) Structural Frame; 2) Human Resources Frame; 3) Political Frame; and 4) Symbolic Frame. Table 2.1 provides details related to these four frames.

Table 2.1

Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model for reframing organizations.

| Frame | Organization focus |
|----------------------|---|
| Structural Frame | This frame focuses on the organization’s formal roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, rules, and procedures. This frame views organizations as machines designed to achieve specific goals efficiently. This frame emphasizes clarity in roles and relationships and seeks to create a well-organized and coordinated structure. |
| Human Resource Frame | This frame focuses on the people within the organization, their skills, needs, motivations, and relationships. It views organizations as communities where individuals’ well-being, development, and engagement are vital for success. This frame emphasizes open communication, professional growth, and alignment of individual and organizational goals. |
| Political Frame | This frame focuses on power dynamics, interests, conflicts, and alliances within the organization. It views organizations as arenas where different groups compete for resources and influence. This frame emphasizes understanding diverse perspectives, managing conflicts, and navigating political dynamics to achieve organizational goals. |
| Symbolic Frame | This frame focuses on the organization’s culture, values, symbols, rituals, and meaning-making. It views organizations as theaters where actions and symbols communicate shared beliefs and define reality. This frame emphasizes creating a meaningful narrative and using symbolism to shape perceptions and create a sense of identity. |

In 2010, Brazer et al. used the Four-Frame model in a multiple case study approach to investigate how superintendents in three school districts worked with stakeholders in the

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decision-making process and to learn how different choices superintendents make alter decision outcomes. The study detailed that, depending on the dynamics of any given committee, superintendents will make choices about how to work with their leadership committees, which can be described using Bolman and Deal's four frames. The research showed that the superintendents in this study responded to accountability pressure by working with committees differently, yet all three tended to achieve the strategic decision outcomes they favored.

The Four-Frame Model was particularly relevant for this study as it provided a robust structure to analyze superintendents' and communication leaders' communication strategies, practices, and decision-making processes. Each frame offered unique insights into different dimensions of organizational behavior, helping to identify commonalities and variations in how district leaders managed crises. This comprehensive approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of crisis management in educational settings.

There is a gap in the literature regarding the integration of theoretical frameworks, like Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, with the practical aspects of crisis leadership in education. Applying Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model in a study examining school district-community communication could help leaders and organizations realize factors they may have overlooked, develop an awareness of the scale of a crisis situation, and provide a deeper understanding of the decision-making processes and communication strategies employed during crises. Utilizing this framework for analysis can assist leaders in addressing problems in a way that fosters innovative and effective problem-solving.

Comparison to Other Referenced Theories

This study applies Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model as the primary theoretical framework. However, insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the

Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) framework were also considered in the research design. To better understand the similarities and differences between these frameworks, Table 2.2 provides a comparative overview:

Table 2.2

Theoretical Comparative Overview

| Aspect | Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model | Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) | Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Framework |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Primary Focus | Organizational behavior and management through multiple perspectives | Strategic crisis communication to protect organizational reputation | Effective communication during public health emergencies and crises |
| Key Components | Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic approaches to decision-making | Crisis type, crisis response strategies, attribution of responsibility | Preparedness, initial event, maintenance, resolution, evaluation |
| Perspective | Multi-dimensional view of organizational operations | Focused on communication strategies and stakeholder perceptions | Focused on risk communication and public response during crises |
| Application Context | Broad organizational contexts, including education, business, non-profits | Public relations, crisis communication, reputation management | Public health, emergency management, disaster response |
| Strengths | Encourages leaders to view situations from multiple angles | Provides a framework for tailoring communication strategies to specific crises | Emphasizes the importance of timely, accurate, and clear communication |
| Limitations | May be complex to apply all four frames simultaneously in a crisis | Primarily concerned with protecting organizational reputation | Focused mainly on health-related crises and may not be fully applicable to other types of crises |
| Usage in Study | Selected as the primary framework for analyzing crisis management and communication in school districts | Referenced for understanding communication strategies but not used in methodology | Referenced for understanding communication strategies but not used in methodology |

Summary

In the preceding literature review, I analyzed aspects of research pertaining to crisis planning, crisis communication, and leaders within PK-12 school districts. The review highlights the significance and need for comprehensive crisis planning and communication strategies in PK-12 school districts, with a specific focus on the unique responsibility of district leaders. The

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gaps and trends identified in this review not only reflect the current state of crisis management in PK-12 schools but also point toward areas needing further exploration. Particularly, the role of leaders in crisis situations, encompassing both superintendents and communications leaders, emerges as a critical area needing deeper investigation. The application of Bolman and Deal's model provides an innovative lens to examine these roles, offering a structured approach to understanding how different leadership frames influence the efficacy of crisis management and communication.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I detail the methodological approach used to explore the decision-making processes, communication structures, and practices within PK-12 public school districts, particularly during times of crisis. Recognizing the complexity inherent in a PK-12 school district, this study adopted a qualitative, multi-site, multi-case study methodology. This approach allowed an in-depth examination of how superintendents and communications leaders navigate the challenges presented by crisis situations.

Grounded in the theoretical insights of Bolman and Deal (2021), who asserted that effective management involves the discernment to choose appropriate strategies for varying situations, this investigation focused on the critical role of superintendents. As organizational leaders, superintendents are required to demonstrate not only the skill to navigate diverse scenarios but also the wisdom to apply the most fitting strategies under pressure. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of these leaders, especially in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, to understand the dynamic nature of crises in educational settings and the pivotal role played by school district leaders.

Employing Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model as a guiding framework, I sought to collate and analyze the insights and experiences of several district leaders from South Carolina. These leaders have successfully steered their districts through various crisis situations. The goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how communication strategies and organizational structures at the district level are utilized in managing both real and perceived crises.

Building upon the theoretical and conceptual groundwork established in the first two chapters, this chapter outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analysis

techniques. These methodological details are essential for investigating the key aspects of crisis communication and decision-making processes in PK-12 public school districts. Through this approach, the study contributes valuable insights into effective leadership and communication strategies in the face of educational crises.

Research Design

The research design of this study was crafted to investigate the intricate dynamics of crisis communication within PK-12 public school districts. Adopting a qualitative, multi-site, multi-case study approach, this research delves into the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders during crises. This conceptual and methodological choice aligns with the theoretical framework selected from Bolman and Deal's (2021) perspective, emphasizing the necessity for leaders to adeptly navigate complex scenarios and apply suitable strategies under pressure. The study's focus on the lived experiences of school district leaders during and following crises illuminates the nuanced nature of educational leadership in challenging times. This section details the design of the research, laying the groundwork for an in-depth exploration of the roles and strategies of district leaders in crisis communication and management.

Effective research planning necessitates a deliberate approach that integrates philosophy, design, and methods. A researcher's philosophical worldview significantly impacts the design and methods of research, effectively transforming the research approach from a theoretical standpoint into practical implementation (Creswell, 2014). To investigate the impact of district-community communications during crises, it was essential to have a strong theoretical framework to inform research design and analysis. Researchers employ theory in their studies as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes, as a theoretical lens or perspective, or as an

endpoint (Creswell, 2014). This theoretical grounding was crucial for developing a robust and insightful analysis.

I chose a constructivist paradigm for this study to emphasize the specific relationship between myself and the participants. This approach allowed for a thorough analysis of the research interactions and an examination of my assumptions and understanding of leader actions and motivations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivist researchers aim to gather and comprehend participants' perspectives, interpreting them to formulate a theory or identify patterns of meaning. Creswell (2014) notes that “constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” and “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p. 8). Constructivism also supports the use of interviews as a research tool, aligning with a qualitative methodological approach (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research focuses on the meanings people construct, characterized by an emphasis on process, understanding, or meaning; the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; an inductive process; and a richly descriptive product (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex dynamics of crisis communication in educational settings.

From an epistemological aspect, knowledge was acquired by going to the educators in their own local environments (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The purpose of this study was not to make statistical generalizations but rather to develop a comprehensive understanding of each participant's distinct viewpoints and identify common themes that emerge from their shared experiences during the research process. In aligning with a constructivist worldview, I emphasized the value of individual perspectives, recognizing that each educator's unique experiences contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under

investigation. By engaging educators in their own environments, I sought to capture the essence of their lived experiences, thereby enriching the knowledge base with diverse, context-specific insights that transcend mere statistical analysis. This approach reflects a commitment to exploring the depth and complexity of human experiences, aligning epistemological considerations with the overarching goal of gaining a holistic understanding of crisis management and communication in educational settings.

Conceptual Design

In this research, I adopted a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's perspective, explaining the phenomenon of the participant's real-life experiences on merit rather than based on presumptions when examining crisis communication strategies within PK-12 public school districts (Creswell, 2014; Waugh & Waugh, 2003). Qualitative research is a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to increase understanding of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). A qualitative method is appropriate for this study on communication structures, practices, and other factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders to manage school districts during times of crisis. This approach aligns with the goal of capturing the complexities and nuances of crisis management in educational settings.

In the social constructionist tradition, I incorporated context-dependent inquiry (interviews) and inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2014). According to the social constructionist view, we are already a part of the social and traditional institutions that came before us and from which we create meaning (Crotty, 1998). Communities and the school districts that serve these communities have developed structures and strategies based on their perceived realities, which shape the expectations for communication within these districts. This perspective emphasizes the

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importance of understanding the context in which communication strategies are developed and implemented. It highlights how historical, cultural, and social factors influence the ways in which districts approach crisis communication.

Qualitative case study research incorporates gathering information through observation and interviews of individuals who worked in their respective positions to acquire an understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Yin, 2015). This methodology allowed for a deep exploration of the nuances and complexities involved in crisis communication within school districts. By engaging directly with school district leaders, this approach uncovered practical realities and challenges they faced in times of crisis, providing rich, detailed insights into their strategies and decision-making processes. This qualitative methodology was a suitable choice for this study because it provided me the opportunity to explore the real-life experiences of school district leaders as it relates to their responsibility in managing critical incidents. Through this method, I captured the intricate details of how leaders navigate crises, revealing patterns and themes that contributed to a comprehensive understanding of effective crisis management in educational settings.

The adoption of a multi-case study approach, as advocated by Creswell (2018) and Yin (2018), aligns well with the objectives of this research. This particular qualitative methodology is appropriate for exploring the perceptions and experiences of school leaders as they navigate the complexities of crisis leadership. By employing this method, the study aimed to uncover the various challenges that leaders face and their strategies for addressing them. The primary method of data collection consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with PK-12 school district leaders who have managed crisis situations in their schools. These interviews were designed to provide in-depth insights into the intricacies of crisis leadership and communication. The

exploration of these experiences led us to the formulation of specific research questions, which guided a thorough and structured inquiry into the decision-making processes, communication structures, and practices within PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis.

Research Questions

The research questions aimed to develop a deeper understanding of leaders' communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors during crises and the resulting communications. A theoretical framework facilitates research by providing a blueprint to design and evaluate an identified problem, allowing the theory to be measured, tested, and extended to serve as a guide for the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This analysis examined the concepts of crisis leadership and communication by applying Bolman and Deal's (2021) Four-Frame Model within the context of constructivist epistemology. The following research questions and sub-questions guided the study:

Main research question: How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?

Sub-question 1: What specific communication structures and practices are most commonly utilized by superintendents and communications executives in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations?

- This sub-question sought to identify and analyze the specific methods and channels of communication employed during crises, examining how these practices vary across different types of crises and school districts.

Sub-question 2: In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model?

- This sub-question aimed to explore the alignment of crisis decision-making with established theoretical models, providing insight into how theory is put into practice in real-world crisis scenarios within the educational setting.

These research questions were designed to explore crisis communication in PK-12 public school districts comprehensively. The main question sets the broad scope of study, while the sub-questions examine specific aspects of crisis communication, decision-making processes, and the practical application of theoretical frameworks.

Participant Selection

The selection of participants for this study employed a purposeful sampling strategy designed to ensure that the individuals included were those most likely to provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into crisis communication within PK-12 public school districts. The selection process was guided by specific criteria to ensure that the participants had relevant experience and insights into crisis management and communication within the educational context. Purposeful sampling is a non-random technique that involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics and criteria that align with the research objectives. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained that purposeful sampling operates on the assumption that the researcher aims to discover, understand, and gain insights, thus necessitating the selection of a sample that offers the most potential for learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with superintendents and communications leaders from selected South Carolina school districts, chosen through purposeful sampling, a strategy widely recognized in qualitative research for its

effectiveness in identifying participants who can provide a rich and diverse array of insights relevant to the study's focus (Creswell, 2018). This approach was chosen to target those with direct experience and critical roles in managing crises, thus enhancing the depth and relevance of the data collected.

The criteria for participant selection were centered around their firsthand experience in managing crises, which is fundamental for gaining a comprehensive understanding of crisis management and communication in educational settings (Palinkas et al., 2015). The selection criteria included having held a leadership position during a school crisis and the recency of the crisis (within the past five years). Participants were required to hold significant leadership roles within their school districts, such as superintendents or communications leaders. These roles are integral to the management of crisis communication and decision-making processes in their districts.

The recruitment process involved identifying potential participants identified as leaders of school districts in the upstate of South Carolina. Initial contact was made via email to introduce the study and invite participation. Formal invitation letters outlining the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation, and the expected time commitment were sent to potential participants. These letters included details about the confidentiality of the study and their rights as participants. Participants who expressed interest were provided with informed consent forms, which detailed the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Follow-up emails and phone calls ensured receipt of the invitation and consent forms and addressed any questions or concerns the potential participants had.

The final group of participants included four superintendents and one communications leader. Specifically, the participants were Supt. 1, Superintendent of District 1A; Supt. 2,

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Superintendent of District 2B; Supt. 3, Superintendent of District 3C; Supt. 4, Superintendent of District 4D; and Comm. 1, Chief Communications Officer of District 4D. These participants are described in detail later in this section.

To ensure a thorough examination of crisis management in educational environments, the study adopted a broad definition of a crisis: a low probability/high consequence event that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization and/or the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders regarding health, safety, or the environment that can significantly impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes (Coombs, 2023; Weick, 1988). By employing a purposeful sampling strategy, the study ensured that the participants selected were those best equipped to provide detailed, relevant, and varied insights into the communication structures, practices, and decision-making processes employed by educational leaders in response to crises. This approach facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication in PK-12 public school districts.

Rural School Leadership. The study focused on four school districts in the southeastern United States, which varied in size and rurality. While rurality is not the primary characteristic of this investigation, it is an important aspect of the decision-making environment. The rural setting of South Carolina school districts was expected to influence the study, potentially impacting the strategies leaders use in crisis management and crisis communication.

Each participant referred to remoteness and rurality during the interviews. This led to the inclusion of data regarding rurality. There is no universal way to describe rural schools, as the U.S. Census Bureau categorizes any place that is not urban as rural (Greenough, 2015). The United States Census Bureau (2020) described rural as an area that lies outside of an urban

cluster (2,500–50,000) or an urbanized area (50,000 or more). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides additional classifications by identifying the distance and remoteness from urban clusters. The NCES provides four school locales: Rural, Town, Suburban, and City. Both the “Rural” and “Town” location types are broken into three categories: Fringe, Distant, and Remote. These rural categories are defined based on distance from an urbanized area (of 2,500+ residents) or a larger urbanized area (50,000 or more), and the town subtypes are defined based on distance from a larger urbanized area (50,000+). Table 3.1 provides criteria from the NCES for the category subtypes within the “Rural” and “Town” location types.

Table 3.1

NCES “Rural” and “Town” Locale Classifications (smallest to largest)

| Locale | Subtype | Criteria |
|---------------|----------------|---|
| Rural | Remote | Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster |
| Rural | Distant | Census-defined rural territory between 5-25 miles from an urbanized area and 2.5-10 miles from an urban cluster |
| Rural | Fringe | Census-defined rural territory 5 miles or less from an urbanized area and 2.5 miles or less from an urban cluster |
| Town | Remote | Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area |
| Town | Distant | Territory inside an urban cluster that is between 10-35 miles from an urbanized area |
| Town | Fringe | Territory inside an urban cluster that is 10 miles or less from an urbanized area |

Participant Overview. To protect participant confidentiality, specific characteristics were either obscured or not discussed, and a pseudonym was assigned to the individual participant. Table 3.2 provides a summary of the participant details.

Table 3.2

Summary of Participants

| Participant Pseudonym | Title | District Pseudonym | District Leader^a | Schools | Enrollment^b |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Supt. 1 | Superintendent | 1A | 10 | 16 | 10,000 |
| Supt. 2 | Superintendent | 2B | 3 | 6 | 3,085 |
| Supt. 3 | Superintendent | 3C | 7 | 14 | 10,949 |
| Supt. 4 | Superintendent | 4D | 8 | 5 | 2,683 |
| Comm. 1 | Chief Communications Officer | 4D | 5 | 5 | 2,683 |

^aThe term “District Leader” refers to the number of years participants in the study have served in their current districts.
^bEnrollment includes students who are actively enrolled as of the 135th day, April 2024 (Q3)

Superintendent 1 (Supt. 1). Superintendent of school district 1A in South Carolina. Supt. 1 has been superintendent of district 1A for 10 years. With 31 total years of experience in education, Supt. 1 grew up in a family of educators, with their mother a teacher, and their father a principal. With 19 years in district 1A, Supt. 1 has served as a high school math teacher, high school assistant principal, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and now superintendent.

As of the 135th day of the 2023-2024 school year, district 1A served 10,000 students in 16 schools. There were 10 elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools that serve 673 square miles. According to the NCES, district 1A was rural:fringe. It also contained sections of town, fringe, with remote sections that are considered rural:distant. The rural:fringe locale code, as defined by NCES, means that the rural area is five or fewer miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 miles or less from an urban cluster. School District 1A claimed that their rural environment is largely free from the hustle and bustle of many communities but is not far from major cities if you need to get to one.

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Supt. 1 was the longest-sitting superintendent among all who participated in this study. While there have been no major safety crises outside of COVID-19 occurring during their tenure, there have been numerous minor crisis events requiring actions and communication. Supt. 1 was able to speak to a number of proactive measures in place for handling crisis communication.

Superintendent 2 (Supt. 2). Superintendent of school district 2B in South Carolina. Supt. 2 has been superintendent of district 2B for three years. With 34 total years of experience in education, Supt. 2 served as a high school teacher and coach in three school districts in South Carolina prior to becoming an administrator. After serving as a high school principal for 18 years, Supt. 2 began as the superintendent of district 2B in March 2021. Supt. 2 also came from a family of educators, sharing, “And so a family of educators growing up. So, my dad was a principal and a superintendent, teacher, coach - all those things as well... And so, I just kind of went up through the system.” Supt. 2 referred to their love for their time as a site principal. “I loved being a principal... it matched me for a long time who I am as a person, as a leader, as an educator. Kind of shaped - really how I do this, this role, too.” An interesting thought shared by Supt. 2 when describing their background experience was, “I tell people all the time...I learned as much from bad principals as I learned from good ones. And I feel like I did the same things with superintendents.”

As of the 135th day of the 2023-2024 school year, district 2B served 3,085 students in six schools. There were four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school that served 143.7 square miles. According to the NCES, district 2B was rural:fringe. While a majority of the district was rural:fringe, 2B also contained a small pocket of suburban:large, with remote sections that are considered rural:distant. The rural:fringe locale code, as defined by NCES, means that the rural area is five or fewer miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 miles or less from

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an urban cluster. In a growing area, district 2B was projected to show a 579-student increase in elementary schools (grades K-6), a 367-student increase for middle school (grades 7-8), and a 372-student increase for the high school over the next nine years. While Supt. 2 had only been superintendent of district 2B since 2021, it is noted that they took over leadership in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also worth noting that district 2B dealt with a school shooting in the past 10 years.

Superintendent 3 (Supt. 3). Superintendent of school district 3C in South Carolina. Supt. 3 had been superintendent of district 3C for seven years. With 34 total years of experience in education, Supt. 3 had served as a high school science teacher, high school assistant principal, high school principal, director of secondary education, assistant superintendent, and now superintendent. Supt. 3 was the principal of the largest high school in the district when there were only two high schools. When referring to their experience with crisis management, Supt. 3 stated, “Well, I’ve had zero formal training in crisis management. When you’re in a high school and we had about 1800 students at that point in time before [New High School] was built, you kind of get a lot of experience in dealing with crises on that level.” As evident in the interview, the COVID-19 pandemic was the largest crisis event described by Supt. 3.

The schools in district 3C serve a diverse student population, with varying socioeconomic backgrounds. As of the 135th day of the 2023-2024 school year, district 3C served 10,949 students in 14 schools. There were eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools that served 156.1 square miles. According to the NCES, district 3C was rural:fringe. There were multiple growing areas of suburban:large within 3C, while it did not contain any pockets of rural:distant. The rural:fringe locale code, as defined by NCES, means that the rural area is five or fewer miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 miles or less from an urban cluster.

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Superintendent 4 (Supt. 4). Superintendent of school district 4D in South Carolina. Supt. 4 had been superintendent of district 4D for eight years. With 37 total years of experience in education, Supt. 4 was a high school biology teacher, coach, guidance counselor, and curriculum specialist over an 18-year span. Supt. 4 then worked at the district office for eleven years as a director and assistant superintendent before being named superintendent in 2016. Supt. 4 described the most varied background experience of all participants:

I spent about one year as a seventh-grade guidance counselor. And then it kind of all runs together for about ten years. I was a guidance counselor in the high school. I was the school-to-work coordinator. Then I became the Assistant principal for Curriculum and Instruction. And after 18 years and well, 17 years in high school, one deviation from middle school, which made my 18th year, I moved to the district office as the Director of Professional Development and Teacher Quality and did that for a while, did all the induction, the ADEPT, and then became an assistant superintendent, really for personnel and for secondary. And then I moved into the superintendent's role in 2016.

As of the 135th day of the 2023-2024 school year, district 4D served 2,683 students in five schools. There were three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school that served 158.6 square miles. According to the NCES, district 4D was rural:distant. While a majority of this district was distant, it also contained sections of fringe. The rural:distant locale code, as defined by NCES, means that the rural area is between 5-25 miles from an urbanized area and 2.5-10 miles or less from an urban cluster.

While describing their background, Supt. 4 shared their motivation to build a strong communication network when they became superintendent.

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Through all those roles, especially as the person who works in personnel and teacher quality and recruiting teachers, we would have teachers come work for us who would say, "Y'all are the best kept secret in [Name] County." And so as I moved into the superintendent role, I'm like, we're going to start telling our story to get employees down here.

This motivation led to district 4D, despite having the smallest enrollment, being the only district with a dedicated Communications Leader. Upon learning this, their Communications Leader was added to the study as a participant.

Communication Leader 1 (Comm. 1). Comm. 1 served as the Chief Communications Officer for school district 4D. Comm. 1 has been the head of communications for district 4D for the past 5 years. Comm. 1 described their experience growing up in district 4D, as a close relative was the director of transportation, enabling them to spend time volunteering and working in the district as a student. With a bachelor's degree in graphic communications. Comm. 1 recently completed their master's degree in educational administration, earning their building-level administrator certification. Prior to becoming the communications leader for district 4D, when Supt. 4 was considering improving communication efforts, Comm. 1 was completing an internship, which involved building websites for schools. This caught the attention of Supt. 4 and led to Comm. 1 later being hired to handle communications full-time. When asked about their role and responsibilities, they shared,

I handle anything from media relations to staff, some staff relations. I am, you know, storyteller. I run our social media website; I handle some of our back end for job recruitment and retention. I'm an event planner. But throughout all that, you know, I manage our communications...Always promoting communication internally and

externally through our school-level, district-level; just increase and working to increase transparency in all fronts is my main goal.

Each participant brought unique experiences and perspectives to the study, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication and management in PK-12 public school districts. Their diverse backgrounds and roles within their respective districts provided valuable insights into the various strategies and practices employed to navigate crises effectively. This diversity among participants enriched the study, highlighting the importance of tailored approaches to crisis management and communication based on specific district needs and contexts.

Data Collection

Case study method and design were used for the data collection because of the complexity of the process due to the nature of the research problem and revealing the phenomenon behind the study. Using an exploratory design, the participants were identified and then notified through personal contacts, email, and social networks, when needed (Onwuebugie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). In addition, the participants received information on the purpose of the research, which aided in gaining an understanding of their perspectives on their experiences (Christensen et al., 2014). In order to maximize data collection, I refrained from utilizing response questions that offered only binary options and instead opted for open-ended questions.

Procedures/Instrumentation

I conducted five in-depth semi-structured interviews with superintendents and communication leaders to develop an understanding of their crisis communications decision-making processes. The data collection for this study was face-to-face or virtual interviews using open-ended questions, allowing the participants the freedom to express their experiences

(Christensen et al., 2014). The interviews with each participant lasted until natural saturation occurred. The goal was for each interview to be from 45 minutes to an hour, allowing participants to reflect upon their lived experiences and provide a verbal account of their experiences. The goal of the interviews was to reveal information about the phenomenon of the participants' experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This type of interview process used a flexible strategy and was refined during the data collection process as needed to maximize the results. Christensen et al. (2014) stated it is essential to gain an understanding of the participant's experience and behavior as a culmination of the revelations in relation to the occurrence of the person experiencing the phenomenon.

Semi-structured Interview. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher sets up some general structure or framework prior to the interview that details what topics, concepts, and themes will be explored within the interview. The person being interviewed has some discretion or latitude in how they answer and how much they provide in response to the questions. The researcher/interviewer then responds by using prompts and follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon their answers. The semi-structured interview is open to new ideas, topics, and concepts that may emerge through the responses of the person being interviewed (Creswell, 2018).

The interviews were designed to elicit rich, detailed responses regarding the participants' experiences with crisis communication, their decision-making processes during crises, and the structures and practices they employ to effectively manage these situations. The interview protocol matrix and interview protocol used to guide this process can be found in Appendix A-1 and A-2. These tools were developed based on the research questions and the theoretical

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framework of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, ensuring the data collected would be relevant and aligned with the study's objectives.

In total, five interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 to 75 minutes. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes, allowing ample time for participants to provide comprehensive insights into their crisis management experiences and communication strategies. The range of interview durations provided flexibility to explore each participant's unique perspectives and adapt to the depth of information they were willing to share.

Data Analysis

The analytical phase of this study was designed to explore and understand the patterns and themes emerging from the collected data, utilizing a comprehensive thematic analysis approach as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodological choice is grounded in its flexibility and robustness, making it well-suited for examining the many aspects of crisis management and communication within PK-12 public school districts. The thematic analysis was conducted through a detailed examination of interview transcripts, employing NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software (Lumivero, 2023) to enhance the rigor and depth of the analysis.

The subsequent paragraphs outline the various stages and functions of this thematic analysis process, including data organization and management, coding, theme identification, and the use of visual tools for an accessible presentation of findings. Additionally, the integration of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model into the data analysis enabled a structured and theoretical interpretation of the results, offering valuable insights into the influence of different leadership frames on crisis management and communication strategies within the educational sector.

Thematic Analysis

Once I collected data from one-on-one semi-structured interviews, I prepared the collected data for analysis. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method, which is a flexible tool for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. I followed a six-phase thematic data analysis process (see Table 3.3) developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) as follows:

Table 3.3

Theme Generation and Development

| Process | No. | Criteria |
|----------------|------------|---|
| Transcription | 1 | Familiarization - Data transcribed and checked for errors |
| Coding | 2 | Generating initial codes |
| | 3 | Codes grouped into subcategories and searching for initial themes |
| Analysis | 4 | Reviewing themes |
| | 5 | <i>Defining and naming themes</i> in alignment with research concepts |
| Writing | 6 | Producing the report |

Familiarizing yourself with the Data and Transcription. Before any analysis of the data could be conducted, the data had to be first transcribed from the audio that was used to record the interviews. Each interview was recorded using a Sony Digital Voice Recorder. I downloaded the recordings and then transcribed them verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing the participants' responses. Transcription of interviews is a vital component of the research process. McLellan et al. (2003) argued that vital data can be lost through inadequate transcription techniques and that researchers must be careful at this stage. I personally transcribed all interview recordings, after which transcriptions were listened to and carefully read to identify inaccuracies. I tried to transcribe when possible within 24-48 hours of the interview taking place,

as the interview was still relatively fresh in my mind. Once transcribed, I checked the transcript for errors by listening to the audio file while reading the transcript again. This was completed at least twice per interview. The transcripts were then anonymized to protect the confidentiality of the participants. In total, the interview data set consists of 218 minutes of recorded interviews, resulting in over 100 pages of transcribed text. Following this transcription process, each interview recording and related transcript file was imported into the NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software (Lumivero, 2023) to enhance the rigor and depth of the analysis. NVivo allowed for thematic analysis of the transcripts while also preserving the recorded audio to review the details of the interview itself and resolve any ambiguities that may exist in the text.

Generating Initial Codes. During this stage, I viewed each interview transcript equally and identified specific aspects of the data that were interesting and had the potential to inform future themes. The codes applied at this stage were brief and developed to capture the commonality of data items without additional context. Open coding was used, which means there were no pre-set codes, but codes were developed and modified through the coding process. The initial coding was completed in NVivo using the coding feature. The software enabled the ability to create nodes (categories) and sub-nodes to categorize themes that emerge from the transcripts. This feature of NVivo aids in a more rigorous and transparent coding process, ensuring the reliability of the analysis (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show a snapshot of coding applied in NVivo.

Figure 3.1

Example of Initial Coding 1

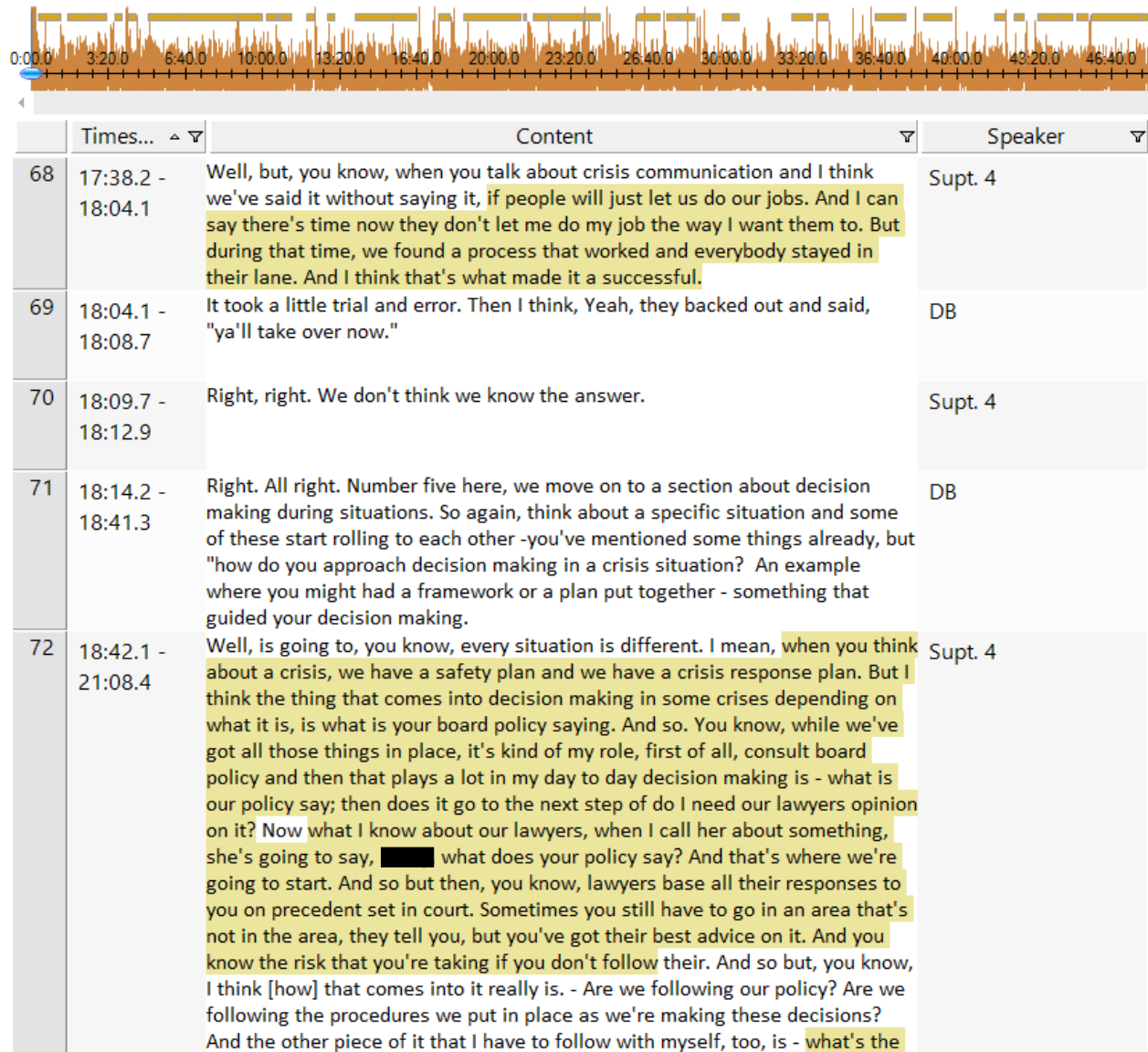
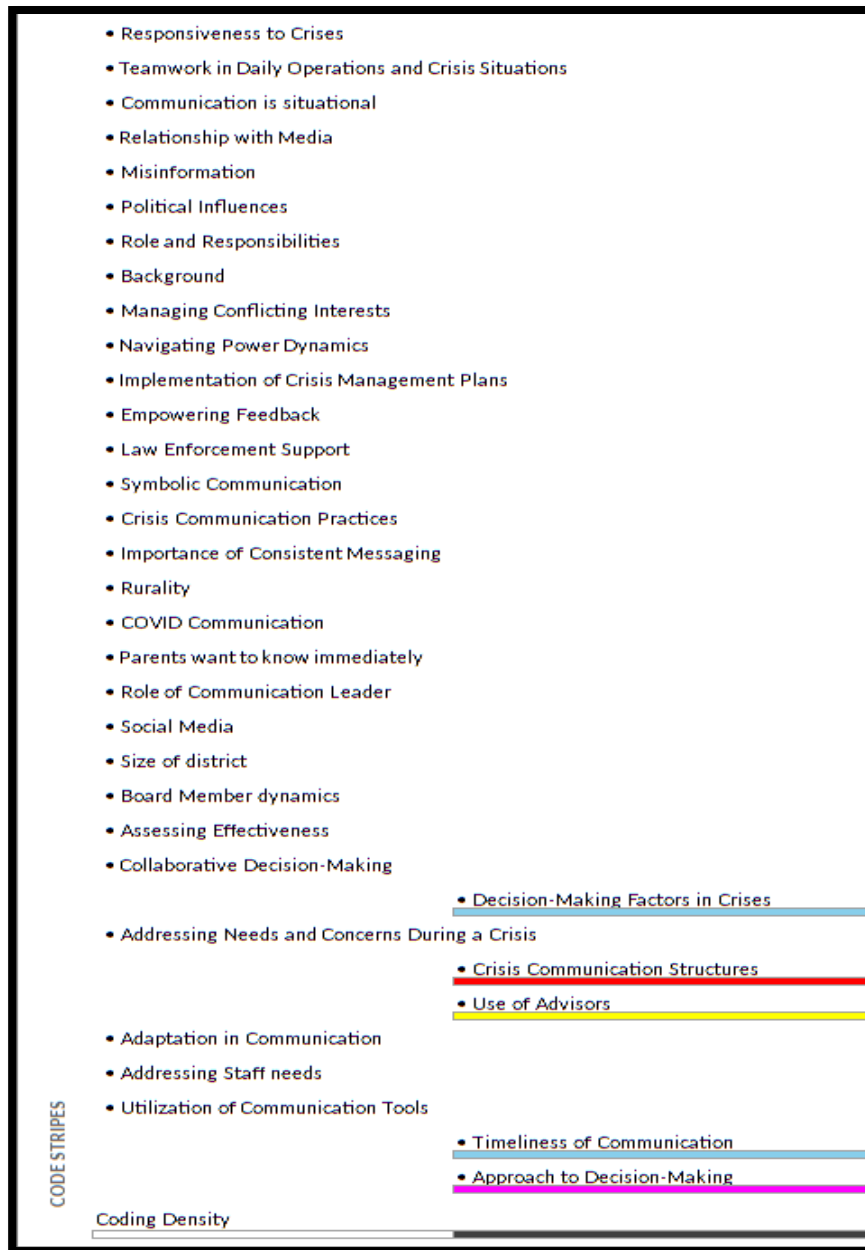


Figure 3.2

Example of Initial Coding 2



For example, one participant stated, “if people will just let us do our jobs. And I can say there's time now they don't let me do my job the way I want them to. But during that time, we found a process that worked, and everybody stayed in their lane. And I think that's what made it a successful”, which was coded “Approach to Decision-making.” This process was completed

for the transcripts of all the interviews and focus groups. Any item of data that was thought to contribute to the research question was coded. The inductive process resulted in 58 hierarchical codes identified from the interview data, primarily including semantic and latent coding. Table 3.4 presents some examples of how the text was coded in this stage.

Table 3.4

| <i>Codes Applied</i> | |
|---|---|
| Text from Transcripts | Code Applied |
| “Well, you better have a plan before the crisis hits. You know, every school district has a crisis management plan.” | Policies and procedures during a crisis |
| “We had to communicate often. We had to be very honest and very upfront. There was a lot of misinformation out there.” | Misinformation |
| “I think our responsiveness to it is what has changed. It's more of a supportive district response versus maybe just the superintendent or just the safety person. There's more than one person kind of in the know because of that.” | Adaptation in communication |

Figure 3.3 is a visualization, generated through NVivo 14, of the most frequently occurring words that began to emerge through the initial coding of the interview data. Terms like "know," "think," "going," and "like" feature prominently, with the term “know” being mentioned most frequently at 380 times, indicating the importance of situational awareness, strategic thinking, and proactive planning in crisis communication. Other significant terms such as "crisis," "communication," "school," and "information" highlight the focus on communication structures and practices within the PK-12 environment. These terms reflect the overall focus of the study and align with the research questions aimed at understanding the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by school district leaders. This representation serves as a preliminary map guiding deeper thematic exploration and aids in

visually anchoring the subsequent analysis to the core concepts that emerged from the initial coding.

Figure 3.3

Word cloud generated by NVivo 14 of the top words that appeared in the first coding.



Searching for Themes. It is noted that in the search for initial themes, I was concerned with addressing specific research questions and analyzed the data with this in mind. While inductive coding was initially used while open coding in the first stages, as the analysis progressed, it leaned toward a theoretical thematic analysis rather than an inductive one. Given

this, each segment of data that was relevant to or captured something interesting about our research question was coded. Following the initial coding, the codes were reviewed and refined to develop overarching categories based on overlapping content and shared meanings (Table 3.5). These categories would be used to inform future development of themes and subthemes. This phase involved reviewing the open coding, merging, renaming, distilling, and collapsing the initial codes into broader categories of codes. This involved combining similar codes, splitting broader codes into more specific ones, and discarding irrelevant codes. A theme is “something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning from the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). The themes were developed iteratively, with constant comparison between the codes and the raw data to ensure that the themes accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Table 3.5

| <i>Codes to Categories</i> | |
|---|---|
| Codes | Categories |
| Board member dynamics External groups Managing conflicting interests Political influences School level dynamics | Navigating Power Dynamics |
| Law enforcement support Policies and procedures during a crisis | Implementation of Crisis Management Plans |
| Emotional Intelligence Staying calm and non-emotional Importance of communication Communication is situational | Approach to Decision-Making |

The categories or codes that remained after the previous step were reviewed for potential developing themes. The categories were clustered into potential themes. This approach enabled the data to be structured in a way that met the research objectives. Phase 3 led to the identification of 10 empirical themes related to crisis communication structures and practices and

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eight themes related to decision-making. For example, the initial theme, Challenges in Crisis Communication, arose from the categories: challenges in implementation, COVID communication, misinformation, and overcommunication. The themes that were labeled at this stage were: being aware of situations, crisis communication plan, importance of consistent messaging, timeliness of communication, adaptation in communication, direct access to superintendent, implementation of crisis management plans, roles of communication leader, size of district, utilization of communication tools, alignment with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, approach to decision-making, assessing effectiveness, challenges in crisis communication, collaborative decision-making, definition of a crisis, empowering feedback, and safety-first decision making.

Reviewing Themes. The analysis refinement process involved recoding the text in the initial codes, reorganizing it into a coding framework, and breaking the themes down into sub-codes to better understand their meanings (Mattimoe et al., 2021). After the initial coding, the codes were reviewed and refined to develop overarching themes that captured the essence of the data. This process included combining similar codes, splitting broader codes into more specific ones, and discarding irrelevant codes. Themes were iteratively developed with constant comparison between the codes and the raw data to ensure accurate representation of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Producing the Report. The final step involved compiling a report summarizing the results of the data analysis. All transcripts, notes, initial themes, and final themes were synthesized into a comprehensive written report that described and interpreted the data. The report detailed the themes that emerged and explained how they aligned with the research questions. Table 3.6 illustrates how codes evolved into initial themes and eventually final

themes, while Table 3.7 presents the final themes and demonstrates how they relate to the research questions. Appendix D contains the codebook and initial codes that emerged during this analysis.

Table 3.6

Example Codes to Themes

| Example Codes | Initial Themes/Categories | Final Theme |
|---|---|---------------------------------|
| Policies and procedures during a crisis, Preparation for a Crisis, Planning and Professional Development, Law Enforcement support | Implementation of Crisis Management Plans | Crisis Communication Structures |
| Responsiveness to Crises, Adaptation | Adaptation in Communication | |
| Relationship with Media | Role of Communication Leader | |
| Communication Tools | Utilization of Communication Tools | |

Table 3.7

Final Themes and Research Questions

| Research Question | Sub Questions | Final Themes |
|---|---|--|
| Main RQ: How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors, to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment? | Sub RQ1: What specific communication structures and practices are most commonly utilized by superintendents and communications executives in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations? | Theme: Crisis Communication Practices |
| | Sub RQ2: In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model? | Theme: Crisis Communication Structure |
| | | Theme: Decision-Making Factors in Crises |

Application of Bolman and Deal's Frames

After the initial thematic analysis using NVivo, the study mapped and interpreted the data against Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, enabling a structured comparison across cases and enhancing the understanding of how different frames influence crisis leadership and communication (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This model serves as a conceptual lens through which the themes and patterns identified in the thematic analysis can be examined more closely. The process involves several key steps:

Categorization of Data into Frames. Each identified theme was categorized into one or more of the four frames – Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic. This categorization was based on the characteristics and implications of the themes as they relate to the aspects of each frame.

- **Structural Frame:** Themes related to policies, rules, roles, and procedures will fall under this frame. The structural frame is compared to a machine or factory, and the critical driving assumptions include prioritizing putting the right people in the right places and adapting the organization's structure to the challenge or task (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
- **Human Resource Frame:** Themes reflecting interpersonal relations, communication styles, and emotional aspects will be analyzed within this frame. The human resource frame is concerned with aligning people and roles, prioritizing the empowerment of employees, and focusing on creating relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
- **Political Frame:** Themes involving power dynamics, conflicts, resource allocation, and external influences will be considered under this frame. The

political frame is compared metaphorically to a jungle, where leaders are forced to compete for scarce resources, and gather power through growing networks and managing conflict appropriately (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

- **Symbolic Frame:** Themes associated with culture, meaning, and symbolism in the leadership and communication styles will be mapped to this frame. The symbolic frame is the most theatrical and ritualistic of the frames, where leaders can call upon powerful themes, organizational heroes, and shared passion to inspire unity and meaning for the work that needs to be done (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

Cross-Case Comparison. I then conducted a cross-case comparison to understand how the frames manifest across different school districts and crisis situations. This comparison involved systematically examining each case study, focusing on how each district applied Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model during crises. By doing so, I was able to identify both commonalities and variations in the utilization of the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. The cross-case comparison process began by reviewing the coded data from each case study, looking for patterns and themes that emerged within each frame. This analysis was conducted through a detailed examination of the crisis communication strategies, decision-making processes, and leadership practices in each district. I paid close attention to the contextual factors unique to each district, such as community demographics, district size, and previous crisis experiences, to understand how these elements influenced the application of the four frames.

By comparing the cases side-by-side, I identified specific instances where districts demonstrated similar approaches to crisis management, such as the emphasis on transparent

communication or the involvement of key stakeholders in decision-making. Additionally, the comparison highlighted unique strategies tailored to each district's specific needs and challenges. For example, one district might prioritize rapid response through a centralized communication team, while another might focus on building strong community partnerships to support crisis management efforts.

Understanding the Influence of Frames on Leadership and Communication. By mapping the data against the Four-Frame Model, the study aimed to understand how different frames influence crisis leadership and communication. It examined which frames are most prominently employed by school leaders during crises and how the interplay of these frames shapes their decision-making processes and communication strategies. The use of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model in data interpretation adds depth to the analysis, providing a structured and theory-driven approach to understand the complexities of crisis leadership in PK-12 school districts. It facilitates a comprehensive understanding of leadership behaviors and communication practices beyond surface-level thematic analysis.

Validity and Reliability

It was imperative to provide findings and interpretations of data that were valid, reliable, and trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that because the researcher is intimately involved in the research, they must continually focus on the neutrality of the data. They caution that hidden biases by the researcher may affect the interpretation of data. To address potential biases, an audit trail was employed, detailing all data collection and interpretation processes. This approach helped to overcome and mitigate bias in this study. To ensure the presence of a substantive and multifaceted study, I collected data from multiple sources and school districts. The combination of these sources of information, which included interviews, questionnaires, and

document analysis, helped validate emerging themes and enhanced the likelihood of producing credible findings. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To enhance the trustworthiness and maintain the reliability of the study, I employed identical interview questions for every participant.

To validate the accuracy of interview interpretations, member checking was utilized (Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Participants were asked to review the initial results from their interview and confirm that their voices were accurately represented (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Additionally, to ensure the reliability of the semi-structured interviews, transcripts were checked for errors (Creswell, 2014). This approach ensured that the study's findings were both reliable and reflective of the participants' true perspectives.

Researcher Positionality

When the researcher acts as the tool for investigation in qualitative research, they must objectively analyze the information given by the participants. However, this can be a limitation due to the researcher's personal background and the participants' capacity to understand and express their own viewpoints. In this case, I am a South Carolina based public relations professional with more than 20 years of experience in public education. Most recently, I have served as Chief Communications Officer for a school district with 16,000 students, handling media relations, crafting messaging, and offering executive leadership counsel, including politically charged incidents, racially based incidents, weather-related incidents, employee relations matters, student misconduct, and a global pandemic, among other crises.

I also served as an elementary school administrator for 14 years. As the researcher, it was imperative for me to comprehend my own personal context within the framework of this research. I must maintain an attitude of awareness and actively attempt to comprehend multiple points of view, refraining from relying only on my personal background and experiences to

shape my interpretation of the data. My previous communications training and experience have placed a high priority on understanding bias and maintaining objectivity when conveying the narratives of others. As a result, I am confident that this training helped me in reducing my personal bias to a minimum.

Buys et al. (2022) addressed the practicalities of conducting semi-structured interviews with fellow educators who work in the same area of professional practice, where the researcher has to address the dual roles of insider and outsider as well as that of researcher and participant. My own role in the interview process, as insider and/or outsider, created duality and defining my position was difficult. I was either viewed as an insider belonging to the group of district administrators that also handles crises or as an outsider coming from a different school district. Participants in the study were all district leaders involved in crisis leadership and, theoretically, colleagues on an equal level, but from different academic institutions (2022). I remained aware of the intersection of my roles as both an insider and an outsider, a position of privilege where I was able to utilize and moderate the strengths and limitations of both perspectives through philosophical assumptions during the interviewing process. This dual and fluid researcher positionality enhanced the quality of the data and promoted a smooth exchange of ideas during the conversations.

Ethical Considerations

I ensured ethical considerations were integrated into every phase of the study design, data collection, and data analysis. Approval was granted from the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study, ensuring adherence to ethical standards. I explicitly defined the study's intent and purpose, distributing participation letters to all interviewees. Participants were provided with informed consent forms, ensuring confidentiality and the right to

withdraw from the study at any point. The IRB-approved Recruitment Letter for participants can be found in Appendix C. Data was anonymized to protect participant identities. Each interview participant received an informed consent form outlining the protocol and risks of participating in the study, with a sample included in Appendix B. Consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. I have taken various research methods courses emphasizing the importance of ethical research and completed training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on human subject research.

Limitations and Assumptions

Understanding the limitations and assumptions inherent in qualitative research is crucial for accurately interpreting the findings and recognizing the potential constraints of the study. These factors play a significant role in shaping the scope and applicability of the research outcomes. Qualitative research and interviews are subject to various limiting factors. One of the largest limitations of any form of qualitative research is that of the time and amount of data that is needed to truly inform the study. The considerable duration of time required to conduct rigorous interviews and assure data accuracy can be substantial. Due to time limitations, a restricted number of participants were utilized, making it difficult to generalize the findings of this study to a broader population (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015). This constraint highlights the challenge of achieving broad applicability from a limited sample size.

The researcher, acting as the main means of inquiry in qualitative interviews, has the potential to introduce a certain degree of bias that may appear intrusive or judgmental (Creswell, 2018). In order to obtain precise and authentic information from the participants, it is necessary to reduce the level of bias. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument and

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must impartially filter through the data provided by the participants. However, this process may be hindered by the researcher's personal context and the participants' capacity to articulate their own viewpoints.

As the researcher, it was imperative for me to comprehend my own personal context within the confines of this research. I am the Chief Communications Officer for a school district and a former school principal. I had to remain mindful and work to understand multiple perspectives and not rely on my own background and experiences to drive my understanding of the data. My communications training and experience focused heavily on the role of bias and how to remain objective in telling the stories of others, so I believe this training was helpful in keeping my own bias level to a minimum.

While my research primarily focused on isolated crisis events rather than the COVID-19 pandemic, it was essential to acknowledge that all the leaders participating in this study may have been managing their current positions as district leaders throughout the pandemic. Interviewing leaders about a crisis while they were concurrently engaged in another one can introduce additional complexity. Although I was unable to evaluate the impact of leading through the COVID-19 pandemic on their ability to make sense of past crisis events, this concurrent experience may have provided them with a unique and enriched perspective on crisis management, potentially offering deeper insights into the strategies and resilience required to navigate multiple challenges simultaneously.

While the aim of the study is to provide in-depth insights, its findings may not be generalizable to all PK-12 public school districts due to the qualitative approach and the specific context of South Carolina. Additionally, the reliance on participant self-reporting may introduce biases. To mitigate the potential unreliability of self-reported data, I employed strategies such as

asking for specific examples, outcomes, and corroborating stories. This approach aimed to prompt participants to provide concrete instances of their experiences, reducing the likelihood of generalized or biased responses. Furthermore, when possible, triangulation was used by cross-referencing the accounts with another member of the district involved in the same situation, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the data collected.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into crisis communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors in PK-12 public school districts. Mapping and interpreting these crisis communication strategies against Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model provided a structured, comparative, and in-depth understanding of how different frames influence crisis leadership and communication in PK-12 public school districts. By understanding how superintendents and communication leaders manage crises, this research informs the development of effective communication strategies and contributes to the broader field of educational leadership and crisis management.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative, multi-site, multi-case study that explored the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during times of crisis. The primary aim of this research was to delve into the intricacies of crisis communication within PK-12 public school districts, with a particular emphasis on understanding the roles of superintendents and communications leaders.

The research question for this study seeks to improve knowledge of the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors connected with leaders during crises and subsequent communications. The following research question guided the study:

Research question: How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors, to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?

The study aimed to explore the following key aspects:

1. **Communication Structures:** The research aimed to identify the specific communication channels, tools, and protocols that superintendents and communications leaders utilize during crisis situations.
2. **Communication Practices:** The study included an examination of how communications practices are adapted to different types of crises and the extent to which they facilitate transparent, timely, and effective communication with stakeholders.

3. **Decision-Making Factors:** The study sought to understand the factors that influence decision-making during crises, including the role of theoretical frameworks such as Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model. This involved exploring how leaders balance competing priorities, navigate uncertainties, and make choices that impact the safety and well-being of students, staff, and the community.

Organization of the Data Analysis

This chapter provides an overview of the data analysis process, detailing the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Each theme is discussed in detail, with illustrative quotes from the participants to provide context and depth to the findings. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings and their implications for educational leadership and crisis communication in PK-12 public school districts. The insights gained from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies associated with crisis communication in educational settings, offering valuable guidance for current and future educational leaders.

Research Design

This study is qualitative in nature. A qualitative case study approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's perspective, explaining the phenomenon of the participant's real-life experiences on merit rather than based on presumptions when examining crisis communication strategies within PK-12 public school districts (Creswell, 2014; Waugh & Waugh, 2003). Qualitative research is a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to increase understanding of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015;). A qualitative method is appropriate for this study on communication

structures, practices, and other factors utilized by superintendents and communications leaders to manage school districts during times of crisis. In the social constructionist tradition, I incorporated context-dependent inquiry (interviews) and inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with superintendents and communications leaders from selected South Carolina school districts. These interviews were designed to elicit rich, detailed responses regarding the participants' experiences with crisis communication, their decision-making processes during crises, and the structures and practices they employ to effectively manage these situations. The interview protocol matrix and interview protocol used to guide this process can be found in Appendix A-1 and A-2. These tools were developed based on the research questions and the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, ensuring that the data collected would be relevant and aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis

The following analysis is organized into four sections, examining how each district addresses the three aspects of crisis communication: 1) Communication Structures, 2) Communication Practices, and 3) Decision-Making Factors. This structure of the findings enables a detailed comparison of the strategies utilized across districts, providing insights into the commonalities and differences in their crisis communication approaches.

Each district's approach is examined through the following three lenses:

- 1. Communication Structures:**

Refers to the formal channels, tools, and protocols that superintendents and

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communications leaders employ to disseminate information during crises. This includes organizational hierarchies, roles, responsibilities, and communication tools like public announcement systems and social media platforms.

2. **Communication Practices:**

Encompasses the actual communication activities, messaging strategies, and stakeholder engagement approaches used during various types of crises. This lens examines how practices are adapted to facilitate timely, transparent, and effective communication.

3. **Decision-Making Factors:**

Involves understanding the guiding principles, frameworks, and situational considerations that influence the decision-making process during crises. Here, the focus is on how leaders navigate uncertainties, prioritize competing interests, and respond to rapidly evolving situations.

The following subsections delve into how each of the four districts approaches these aspects based on the interviews conducted with their superintendents and communications leader. Interview quotes are shared along with the code or category for each individual.

District 1A - Superintendent 1

Superintendent 1 of District 1A has a deep understanding of the critical role of communication in crisis management. With over 32 years in education, Supt. 1's extensive experience spans roles such as teacher, assistant principal, principal, and various administrative positions. This rich background has equipped them with the skills and insights necessary to effectively lead and manage crisis situations in a school district setting.

In District 1A, Supt. 1 has implemented a centralized communication structure led by a Public Information Officer (PIO), who plays a crucial role in coordinating all media inquiries and

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ensuring consistent communication across the district. "Our PIO is the main point of contact for any media-related issues, and they ensure that our messaging is coherent and timely," explained Supt. 1. This centralized approach allows for a streamlined flow of information, which is vital during crises.

The district's communication strategy is built on the principles of transparency and honesty. Supt. 1 emphasized, "We believe in being upfront with our community. It's important that we share what we know, even if it's not complete, rather than leaving them in the dark." This commitment to openness helps build trust with stakeholders, including parents, staff, and the broader community. By keeping lines of communication open and clear, the district can address concerns more effectively and mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Supt. 1 also highlighted the importance of having predefined roles and responsibilities during a crisis. "Everyone on our team knows their specific duties when a crisis occurs. This clarity helps us respond quickly and efficiently," they noted. The district's leadership team, including the PIO, principals, and other key administrators, works cohesively to manage crisis situations. This well-defined structure ensures that there are no overlaps or gaps in responsibilities, which is critical for maintaining order and ensuring a coordinated response.

Decision-making in District 1A is a collaborative process, involving input from various stakeholders. Supt. 1 described their approach, stating, "We make decisions as a team. It's important to have diverse perspectives, especially during a crisis, to ensure we consider all angles and impacts." This inclusive decision-making process not only enhances the quality of decisions but also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among team members.

The district also places a strong emphasis on proactive planning and preparedness. Supt. 1 shared an example of a recent initiative, "We conducted a series of training sessions for our

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staff to ensure they are well-prepared for different types of crises. It's about being ready before something happens." This proactive stance enables the district to respond swiftly and effectively when crises do occur, minimizing disruptions and ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff.

Reflecting on their experiences, Supt. 1 acknowledged the challenges of crisis communication but remained committed to continuous improvement. "Every crisis is a learning opportunity. We always debrief after an incident to see what worked and what didn't, and we make adjustments accordingly," they said. This reflective practice helps the district refine its crisis management strategies and be better prepared for future incidents.

In summary, District 1A, under the leadership of Supt. 1, has developed a robust approach to crisis communication and management. The district's emphasis on centralized communication, transparency, predefined roles, collaborative decision-making, and proactive planning ensures that they are well-equipped to handle crises effectively. Supt. 1's leadership style, shaped by their extensive experience, underscores the importance of adaptability, strategic planning, and continuous improvement in managing crises in PK-12 public school districts.

Communication Structures of District 1A. Supt. 1 outlined the evolution of their communication strategy, explaining that District 1A uses a core group of leaders that make decisions regarding crisis communications. The district now employs a Public Information Officer (PIO), reflecting a move toward a more structured approach to managing communication. Supt. 1 shared that this role has strengthened the ability to maintain a single, consistent point of contact for all external communications, thereby avoiding confusion and ensuring that all messaging aligns with the district's policies and public image. This change aims to streamline communication during crises. Supt. 1 highlighted the benefits of this centralized

approach: “When I first became superintendent, we pretty much handled the communication with the press and the local folks had our cell numbers and they'd just call us directly.” This adaptation has evolved to where “when there is one person we've learned, and it took a little while, but we've learned that now they contact that person for the most part.” Supt. 1 further explained, “Now I can think of exceptions but for the most part we've told the media if you need information you call [PIO] or Email [PIO].” This ensures consistency and clarity, as “just keeping it to one person helps that person form relationships with the media. It clarifies our message and keeps different people from saying different things.” This structure allows the district to manage communications effectively, especially during sensitive situations where information needs to be controlled and disseminated responsibly.

Supt. 1 also referenced crisis preparedness plans as a crucial part of their structure, emphasizing their responsiveness to crises: “Certainly, in an actual happening crisis, should there be an emergency, you know, shooter or whatever, then we have certain protocols.” These protocols are integral to the district's ability to respond swiftly and efficiently to emergencies.

Communication Practices of District 1A. Supt. 1 discussed how the PIO's involvement ensures that communications are not only centralized but also strategically released. This practice helps in managing the district's image and ensures that communications are timely and accurate. The PIO also plays a crucial role in forming relationships with the media, which can be beneficial during ongoing or unfolding crises. Supt. 1 emphasized the importance of school-level expectations, stating, “if it comes to something that's going to be controversial or negative, they know to contact us.” This ensures that potential crises are managed centrally.

Supt. 1 detailed specific practices used in District 1A during a crisis:

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And we have some of that in that, particularly if it's one of those, you know, a school shooting type incident... We've talked about who goes where. You know, [Asst. Supt.] goes to the site of the emergency. I go to the reunification site. [PIO] would go and work with our sheriff's office's communications person there. "What can we release? When we release?" - That kind of thing... So we've got some of that.

This approach underscores the importance of having a clear plan and predefined roles during emergencies.

Media relations are managed to ensure that inquiries are handled professionally and align with district policies. Supt. 1 noted, "When media attempt to contact other leaders, they are all referred to the PIO, because even if we get them, we're going to forward them on to her and she's going to be the release of information." Controlling the release of information is critical, as timely communication ensures that the district is the primary source of information. Supt. 1 explained, "So we want the message to come from us rather than a kid and a kid's parents." This proactive approach was developed after learning from past incidents: "There was a lot of chatter that parents need to know when there's a threat at the school... We start telling them." These practices are essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring that the district's narrative remains consistent across various platforms and interactions.

Decision-Making Factors of District 1A. Supt. 1 emphasized the importance of calm and deliberative decision-making, particularly during crises where the stakes are high. They noted the need for decisions to be made collectively rather than by individuals to avoid errors that could arise from snap judgments or emotional reactions. "The worst thing you can do is make a decision, a snap decision based on emotion," Supt. 1 stated. They added, "I hope that I display calmness and, you know, not react under emotion and then just kind of think through...try

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to think through a week from now... what is this going to look like and how we respond, that kind of thing.” This calmness, according to Supt. 1, brings trust.

Collective decision-making is another critical factor. Supt. 1 explained, "I believe that multiple people make better decisions than one person. So, when it comes to what to release almost at a minimum [PIO] and [1A Assistant Supt.] and I will talk.” However, they also acknowledged, “There's a danger of getting too many people in the room sometimes, too.”

Reflection and responsibility are also emphasized. Supt. 1 discussed the importance of assessing potential outcomes and implications of decisions and owning up to mistakes. “So keep it short. Admit that we were wrong. Go ahead and put it out there that we're very thankful,” they advised. Assessing the effectiveness of decisions is also crucial:

How big of a crisis did it become? I can think of one a couple of years ago that we dealt with that we didn't handle well initially. If we had handled the communication part of it well up front, this would have been a nothing - I mean, it would have just been fine. I think you assess the effectiveness a lot of times just based on how the situation turns out. The approach described by Supt. 1 ensures that the decision-making process is not only thorough but also considers various perspectives, which can significantly impact the effectiveness and reception of the district's crisis management efforts.

District 2B - Superintendent 2

Superintendent 2 of District 2B has an extensive background in education, spanning 34 years. Their experience includes roles as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, and high school principal for 18 years, during which they had the unique opportunity to open a brand-new school. Coming from a family of educators, Supt. 2's parent was also a principal, superintendent, teacher, and coach, which influenced their career path significantly. Their journey through various

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educational roles has shaped their leadership style and approach to crisis management, emphasizing the importance of learning from both positive and negative experiences in educational leadership. Reflecting on their career path, Supt. 2 mentioned, "I learned as much from bad principals as I learned from good ones. And I feel like I did the same thing with superintendents."

In District 2B, Supt. 2 has implemented a structured approach to crisis management, particularly in communication. The district's leadership team consists of 14 members, including principals and district administrators, ensuring that communication lines are direct and efficient. Principals have immediate access to Supt. 2, allowing for rapid response and decision-making during crises. This structure was formalized with the development of a comprehensive communication plan that addresses all aspects of crisis management, developed with input from key stakeholders and with assistance from the interviewer. Supt. 2 explained, "We started something a year and a half ago - with your help - to develop a communication plan that dealt with all of our crisis management."

The district's crisis communication protocol, referred to as "Level Four," ensures that any member of the leadership team who first encounters a crisis can initiate the response. This protocol includes immediate communication through text messages or phone calls between the principal, the student services director, the safety and security officer, and Supt. 2. This system ensures that there is always someone available to respond to emergencies, providing much-needed support for principals and maintaining a coordinated response. They elaborated,

Our principals know - and that's a text message or a phone call between the principal, my student services director and my safety and security, and me; and those two know regardless of who sees this first whoever sees it first is going - is responding and going.

Supt. 2 emphasized the importance of proactive communication with the community, particularly in the context of immediate and honest messaging. They acknowledged that while families desire instant information, it is crucial to communicate only verified facts to avoid misinformation. This approach was exemplified during an incident involving a person walking near a school with a gun. The district's response was swift and coordinated, involving multiple layers of communication and ensuring that all stakeholders were informed appropriately. "We know there's one of us that's going to be available all the time... We've done a good job of communicating," they stated.

Decision-making during crises in District 2B is guided by predefined protocols, ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clear. Supt. 2 highlighted the importance of decisive action during emergencies, where consensus-building might not be feasible. This approach was evident during a bomb threat incident early in their career, where they had to make authoritative decisions to ensure the safety of students and staff. They recounted, "I told our assistant principals at that time when I grabbed them together, I said this is what we're going to do. I said I do not need your input. I need us to do what I need you to do right now."

Supt. 2 also stressed the significance of informal debriefing after crises to evaluate the effectiveness of their response strategies. While the district does not have a formal process for this, regular discussions with key team members help identify areas for improvement and reinforce the district's readiness for future incidents. An example of this reflective practice was evident when handling an incident involving a staff member and a student, where timely communication and appropriate actions were crucial in managing the situation and addressing parental concerns. They noted, "I think what we do is more informal debrief on things."

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The district's approach to addressing the needs and concerns of staff, students, and parents during crises is comprehensive. Supt. 2 provided an example of a board meeting where opposing groups debated book bans, creating an uncomfortable environment for principals. In response, they arranged for a resource officer to be nearby during meetings to ensure safety and provide reassurance to staff. This decision was made in consultation with the school board and principals, demonstrating their commitment to inclusive decision-making and addressing staff concerns. "We don't have to be heavy-handed... I said we're going to have one of them close by," they explained.

Navigating power dynamics among various groups, such as the school board, teachers, and administrators, is another critical aspect of Supt. 2's role. They ensure that the school board is kept informed of ongoing situations, which helps maintain their trust and support. They also empower principals to communicate with their staff, fostering a culture of transparency and trust within the district. "I think making sure that safety and security are first is going to outweigh how we communicate or when we communicate," they stated.

In summary, District 2B under Supt. 2's leadership has developed a proactive and structured approach to crisis communication and management. The district's emphasis on clear protocols, immediate and honest communication, and reflective practices ensures that they are well-prepared to handle crises effectively. Supt. 2's leadership style, shaped by their extensive experience and background in education, underscores the importance of adaptability, decisive action, and collaborative problem-solving in managing crises in PK-12 public school districts.

Communication Structures of District 2B. Supt. 2 emphasized the importance of direct and clear lines of communication between district leadership and school principals. The structure they have established allows for rapid and efficient information flow during crises. Supt. 2

highlighted several key points about their communication structure. The district ensures that principals have a direct line to the superintendent, stating, "Our principals have a direct line to me. They get me whenever they want me." This direct access is crucial in a small district where issues at one school can impact others due to the close-knit nature of the community:

A lot of times our principals get bothered if something's going on - because we're small. I mean, we're really small - And if something happens at [2B school] Elementary. It's certainly going to potentially affect our middle and high school because of siblings or families or whatever or just, you know, neighborhoods.

In addition to this direct line of communication, District 2B has adapted by developing a comprehensive crisis communication plan. "We started something a year and a half ago to develop a communication plan that dealt with all of our crisis management," Supt. 2 explained. This plan has improved the district's responsiveness, shifting from isolated responses to a more coordinated district-wide approach: "I think our responsiveness to it is what has changed. It's more of a supportive district response versus maybe just the superintendent or just the safety person."

The district's crisis management structure includes a 14-member leadership team involving principals and district administrators, ensuring a comprehensive response mechanism. "Everybody's got a role when something happens," Supt. 2 noted. This well-coordinated leadership team and comprehensive crisis communication plan facilitate efficient crisis management even without a dedicated communication leader handling media relations.

Communication Practices of District 2B. District 2B employs a proactive communication plan specifically designed to address crises effectively. This plan ensures that all leaders understand their roles and responsibilities, which helps maintain consistency and

accuracy in crisis messaging. One of the core practices is the "Level Four" Crisis Response System. Supt. 2 described it as follows: "We call it level four... and those two know regardless of who sees this first - whoever sees it first is going - is responding and going." This system ensures that leadership is prepared to handle a range of crises quickly: "If we have a level four, then our plan goes into effect, and everybody's been kind of a part of that and been trained on how to do that." The system guarantees that "one of us is going to be available all the time – that is in the district every day that's going to be able to respond," Supt. 2 emphasized, noting instances where the rapid response team has managed situations like unruly parents effectively.

Responsiveness and adaptability are also key components of their communication practices. "I think our responsiveness to it is what has changed. It's more of a supportive district response versus maybe just the superintendent or just the safety person," Supt. 2 highlighted. The timeliness of communication is critical, as families expect immediate updates. "What we've learned with our families is they want to know immediately. And that's not always - You don't always have that opportunity there," Supt. 2 stated. This proactive approach ensures that the district's communication is immediate, responsive, and adaptable to various crises.

Decision-Making Factors of District 2B. Supt. 2 values quick decision-making in crisis situations, favoring a structured approach over broad consensus, which can delay the response. "But it may be that we, you know, we've got to make a decision, and this is it. And for better or worse, this is what it's going to be. So, yeah, we're not looking for a lot of consensus around and during a crisis," Supt. 2 explained. They also highlighted the importance of predetermined protocols and a clear division of roles to streamline decision-making during emergencies: "We've kind of got our protocols. So, some of the decision-making was done prior to. But in the face of

it, you know, we don't need everybody's voice. You know, we need everybody to follow some directions in the middle of a crisis."

Prioritizing safety and security was paramount for District 2B. "For us, I think making sure that safety and security are first is going to outweigh how we communicate or when we communicate. So that to me is the biggest conflict, right? Is being able to make sure that you're able to deal with and keep students and staff safe," Supt. 2 stated. This priority is clear as they note, "If the parents got it, if they had a choice between safe or learning they're going to choose safe every day. Every day. They'd love to have both, but they're going to choose safe every single time."

Managing expectations and empowering feedback are also critical aspects of their decision-making process. "We're intentionally honest but we're not giving all the information in a text or an email, and we will have people call like [asst supt.] or student services... But he may be involved on the front line in this thing too," Supt. 2 noted. Listening to feedback from parents has also shaped their communication strategies:

We've, you know, listened to feedback from our parents. ... We've heard from parents when they said, hey, we would rather get this than a text message. And so, you know, that's one thing I've talked about to principals, you know, we've heard from them like we got we need to do what they prefer, what they're going to or they're going to listen to.

District 2B's decision-making factors prioritize safety and security above all else. By adhering to established protocols and ensuring a structured division of roles, the district ensures that decisions are swift, strategic, and focused on maintaining the well-being of students and staff.

District 2B Summary. Overall, Superintendent Supt. 2's approach to crisis management in District 2B illustrates a proactive and well-structured system that emphasizes clarity, responsiveness, and prioritization of student and staff safety while balancing the communication needs of parents, staff, and the broader community.

District 3C - Superintendent 3

Superintendent 3 of District 3C brings a wealth of experience to their role, having spent their entire 34-year career within the same district. They have held various positions, including teacher, assistant principal, principal, director of secondary education, and assistant superintendent of administration, before becoming the superintendent. This extensive background has provided Supt. 3 with a comprehensive understanding of the district and its needs, which is particularly valuable in crisis management. "I'm the superintendent, so I'm the head guy, the CEO here in the district, managing all the operational aspects," Supt. 3 explained.

In discussing their approach to crisis management, Supt. 3 emphasized the importance of having a structured and well-defined communication strategy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the district's leadership team, consisting of the superintendent, assistant superintendents of administration and instruction, and the director of personnel, functioned as the core decision-making body. This small, focused team allowed for quick decision-making and efficient information dissemination. "We knew early on that communication with our parents and our community was going to be critical. We had to communicate early, we had to communicate often, and we had to be very honest and very upfront," they shared.

One of the key strategies implemented by District 3C was the creation of expert teams to assist in decision-making. These teams included educators, parents, and even pediatricians, who provided valuable insights and recommendations. "We created some teams of experts that

basically helped us in making recommendations for things like whether we should return to school," Supt. 3 noted. This collaborative approach not only ensured that decisions were well-informed but also helped build trust with parents and the community.

Communication during the pandemic was frequent and multi-channel, utilizing emails, voicemails, and updates on the district website. Supt. 3 stressed the importance of regular communication, stating, "At least once a week, if not two or three times a week, we would send communication by email and voicemail and put it all on our website." This ensured that stakeholders were kept informed and reduced the spread of misinformation.

In terms of decision-making, Supt. 3 highlighted the need for accurate information and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. "I try to get as much information as I possibly can," they said. "You need to take time to make sure that the most important data points are true and accurate." This thorough approach to information gathering, combined with input from various stakeholders, helps the district make well-rounded decisions.

Assessing the effectiveness of communication strategies and decisions is an ongoing process in District 3C. Supt. 3 emphasized the importance of feedback and reflection. "You create a network of folks that you can get relevant information from and you learn who you can trust and who brings you valuable information," they explained. This network includes board members, social media monitors, and community members who provide feedback on the district's crisis response.

Challenges in implementing crisis communication strategies are inevitable, and Supt. 3 acknowledged that not all plans go as expected. Reflecting on the quarantine process during COVID-19, they noted, "It was a [confusing] flow chart, and it became overwhelming... It

created all this misinformation." The district learned the importance of simplifying communication to avoid confusion and frustration among parents and staff.

The district's structure for crisis management involves clear roles and responsibilities. Any significant crisis involves the superintendent and assistant superintendents, with the director of secondary education (who also serves as the PR person) playing a crucial role. Recently, the district hired a dedicated communications person, which has significantly enhanced its capacity to manage media relations and public communication. "I don't know how we did without her up to this point," Supt. 3 remarked.

Addressing the needs and concerns of staff, students, and parents during crises is a priority for District 3C. The district has a systematic approach to ensuring that information is communicated effectively and promptly to all stakeholders. "Our school administrations typically always know before anybody else knows," they explained. This tiered communication strategy ensures that staff are well-informed and prepared to support students and manage parental concerns.

Navigating power dynamics and political struggles during crises is another critical aspect of Supt. 3's role. They work closely with the school board and other political entities to ensure alignment and support. "Our board is probably the most important political entity that we have to deal with," they stated. Maintaining open lines of communication with the board and other stakeholders helps the district manage conflicts and navigate complex situations effectively.

In summary, District 3C under the leadership of Supt. 3 has developed a proactive and collaborative approach to crisis communication and management. The district's emphasis on structured communication, accurate information, and inclusive decision-making ensures that they are well-equipped to handle crises effectively. Supt. 3's leadership style, shaped by their

extensive experience within the district, underscores the importance of adaptability, strategic planning, and continuous improvement in managing crises in PK-12 public school districts.

Communication Structures of District 3C. Supt. 3 discussed the benefits of having a compact team for decision-making during crises, which includes the superintendent and key assistant superintendents. This structure allows for the quick gathering and dissemination of information. District 3C recently added a part-time Public Information Officer (PIO), shared with an adjoining school district, reflecting a move toward a more structured approach to managing communication. When describing the structure used during COVID-19, Supt. 3 highlighted the streamlined decision-making team comprising key administrative figures, which helped manage crisis communication efficiently.

The core decision-making team during COVID-19 consisted of the superintendent, assistant superintendent of administration, assistant superintendent of instruction, and the director of personnel. Supt. 3 explained, "The four of us basically went into a room for about a year...because there were so many decisions to be made and the decisions had to be made so quickly." This small, focused team enabled rapid decision-making and effective crisis management.

The district also emphasized the importance of having well-defined policies and procedures in place before a crisis hits. "Well, you better have a plan before the crisis hits. You know, every school district has a crisis management plan," Supt. 3 noted. They stressed that the crisis management plan should be a "living, breathing document" that is actively used and understood by all relevant personnel, rather than a static document that sits on a shelf.

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In terms of public relations support, Supt. 3 mentioned, "We have a Director of Secondary Education [who] also carries the title of our PR person," indicating that public relations duties are integrated into existing roles within the administration.

Adaptation in communication was another key point. Supt. 3 shared:

I think one of the things that I learned early on was that is that I that that was not necessarily on my radar - was communicating with parents and the community.

Communicating with teachers and the students and the district office... I knew, and I did that, but sometimes I did have to be reminded, hey, you might need to send something out to the parents.

The addition of the part-time PIO has further strengthened the district's communication strategy. "The PIO's really the only trained one we have on the staff that can say, 'Here's what I recommend you respond as far as to the media. Here are some things that I think you might want to consider putting in the, you know, the parent email or whatever, whatever the case may be,'" Supt. 3 explained.

District 3C's communication structure relies on a small, core decision-making team that enables swift crisis response. Multiple job descriptions cover specific roles and responsibilities, and public relations is integrated into the team.

Communication Practices of District 3C. District 3C has a practice of frequent and transparent communication with the community, especially during crises, using various channels like email, voicemail, and the district website. Transparency and frequency in communication were emphasized, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to keep the community well-informed.

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Supt. 3 highlighted the importance of transparency and frequency: "We had to communicate early, we had to communicate often, we had to be very honest and very upfront." This practice of regular updates ensured that stakeholders were consistently informed. The district utilized a multi-channel communication approach, as Supt. 3 explained, "At least once a week if not two or three times a week we would send communication by email and voicemail and put all this on our website as well."

Keeping students notified was also a priority. Supt. 3 stated,

Our philosophy is that we typically don't hold things from our kids. We, you know, if there's an issue, we're going to say the issue to the kids; obviously depending on grade level. And then, you know, once the kids are notified and of course, we want to notify the kids there's mass communication that goes out, you know, once you notify the kids.

This approach ensures that students are aware of the situation and helps manage their reactions appropriately.

Expert input is another critical aspect of the district's communication practices. Supt. 3 noted, "We created some teams of experts that basically helped us in making recommendations." These expert teams provided valuable insights and recommendations, enhancing the district's communication strategy.

Decision-Making Factors of District 3C. Supt. 3 highlighted the importance of expert input and broadening the decision-making panel to include stakeholders like parents and health professionals. This approach provides a holistic view of the crisis and helps ensure decisions are well-informed and balanced.

The approach to decision-making involves gathering as much information as possible. "I think number one is I try to get as much information as I possibly can. And then sometimes you

don't have all the information that you need. But you at least need to take time to make sure that the most important data points are true and accurate, that that's what you're basing your decision on," Supt. 3 explained.

Expert teams and recommendations play a significant role. "One of the things that you do prior to the crisis is, you create a network of folks that you can get relevant information from and you learn who you can trust and you learn who brings you valuable information," Supt. 3 shared. "We created some teams of experts that basically helped us in making recommendations."

Communication during a crisis is situational, as Supt. 3 noted:

Obviously, every situation is a little bit different. Sometimes it doesn't really involve the staff and sometimes it doesn't involve kids. And there are times when it really doesn't involve the parents where you really don't have you've got some information that the parents probably want, but you're like, well, I can't release that information to you.

The administration typically notifies school staff first, followed by students, depending on the situation:

The administration is first typically the school staff (2nd) and it could be the whole district just depending on the situation. The students get notified fairly quickly after that, unless it's something that we feel like we need to we need to manage the student reaction.

Ensuring accurate information and addressing blind spots are crucial. "Having as much accurate information as you can. And then I think having people around you that help you see the blind spots," Supt. 3 emphasized.

Empowering feedback is another key consideration. "You as a leader, you have got to listen and you've got to take in, you know, those people that are the naysayers and they're some

of the best people that you can have to say, 'What do you not like about this?'" Supt. 3 explained. "You need to, you know, you need to hear those things before you make a decision as to how to move forward with the plan." This practice includes checking in with stakeholders after a crisis: "I think those are that those are things that in the middle of a crisis or at the end of the crisis you're touching base with those with those outlets and saying how did this go." Creating a system where people feel empowered to provide feedback is essential: "I think also creating a system so that people feel very empowered to be able to call and email and text and to provide valuable information to you." Supt. 3 cautioned against shutting down dissenting voices:

If you're always shutting people down, if you anybody that says something negative and [your response is] you're a naysayer, then you know, you just wall yourself off from the people who could really be giving you some valuable input.

Adaptability is also critical. Supt. 3 noted, "We also knew that we were going to have to be able to change...We were going to have to be nimble enough to alter that and change that." This flexibility ensures that the district can respond to evolving situations effectively.

District 3C's decision-making factors emphasize the importance of accurate information, adaptability, and stakeholder input. Clear goals and a flexible approach help ensure decisions are strategic, balanced, and prioritize the safety and well-being of students and staff.

District 3C Summary. Superintendent Supt. 3's approach to crisis management in District 3C is characterized by a structured communication system, transparent and frequent communication practices, and strategic decision-making that prioritizes adaptability, empowering feedback, and seeking expert input. The district's streamlined core team and multi-channel communication strategy ensure effective and timely crisis management.

District 4D - Superintendent 4 and Comm. 1

Superintendent 4. In District 4D, Supt. 4 emphasized the critical role of communication and teamwork in managing crises. Reflecting on their extensive experience, including time spent as a high school teacher, guidance counselor, and various administrative roles, Supt. 4 discussed how these experiences shaped their approach to crisis management. Supt. 4 explained that their district employs a highly effective centralized communication structure, particularly highlighting the use of the Aptegey app with the Thrillshare platform. This platform allows for simultaneous updates across multiple channels, including the district website, Facebook, Instagram, text messages, and calls. This capability has been invaluable in both routine and crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where timely and consistent communication was essential.

Supt. 4 described a systematic approach to crisis communication, involving a progression of information dissemination. Information is first shared with the superintendent's cabinet, then with principals, staff, and finally the community. This structured approach ensures that everyone receives the information they need at the appropriate time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this method allowed for clear and consistent messaging, which helped maintain stability and trust within the community. Supt. 4 remarked, "I told our teachers, 'We're building this plane as we're flying it.' It was about taking it one day at a time and ensuring the district's commitment to taking care of everyone."

When discussing more immediate crises, such as a tragic incident involving a parent being hit by a car at a bus stop, Supt. 4 highlighted the importance of quick, coordinated responses. They noted the role of the Chief Communication Officer (CCO), who manages media relations and ensures accurate information is disseminated quickly. Supt. 4 stated, "We have it set up where [the CCO] is communicating with me, and [they] will say so-and-so's called, and this is

what we're saying." This coordination allows Supt. 4 to focus on managing the situation on the ground while the CCO handles communication with the public and media.

In terms of decision-making during crises, Supt. 4 underscored the importance of following established policies and consulting with legal advisors when necessary. They explained, "First of all, consult board policy and then get the lawyer's opinion if needed. Timing is also crucial – some decisions need to be made immediately, while others can benefit from a more measured approach."

Supt. 4 also discussed the evaluation of communication strategies and decision-making effectiveness. They measure success by the community's response, stating, "Did the message get out? Was it taken well? How was it delivered?" They emphasized the importance of feedback, noting that positive responses from staff and the community are indicators of effective communication. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, using surveys to gauge parents' opinions on virtual learning provided valuable insights, resulting in high response rates and informed decision-making.

Throughout the interview, Supt. 4 highlighted the significance of continuous communication and teamwork. Regular meetings with the superintendent's cabinet and administrators ensure that everyone is on the same page, which is crucial during a crisis. Supt. 4 concluded, "The daily teamwork is what's going to make your crisis plan work. If you're working as a team every day, then when that crisis comes up, you're naturally going to work as a team." This collaborative approach, combined with a robust communication framework, enables District 4D to manage crises effectively and maintain trust within the community.

Communications Leader 1. In the interview with Comm. 1, the Chief Communications Officer for District 4D, several key aspects of crisis communication and management were

highlighted. Comm. 1 oversees a wide range of responsibilities including media relations, internal staff communications, and the management of social media and the district's website. "I handle anything from media relations to staff relations," Comm. 1 explained, noting their role as a storyteller and event planner who is deeply involved in promoting transparency both internally and externally.

Comm. 1 described the district's implementation of a comprehensive crisis plan, which includes a district-wide plan detailing who handles various aspects of crisis management. The district has developed an emergency email group that includes district and school administrators and other key personnel. Comm. 1 noted, "I have an emergency email group... if something happens... I send it to the email group." This ensures that all relevant parties are promptly informed of any crisis situation. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of having backups in place for communication roles, explaining, "we've been working to have backups in case I'm not here and something happens."

The district employs a multi-faceted approach to communication during crises, using both email and text messaging to ensure that information is disseminated efficiently. For instance, during a recent power outage, Comm. 1 sent updates via email and text messages to keep everyone informed. This proactive approach extends to maintaining clear and consistent messaging. Comm. 1 highlighted, "we've learned that there's no such thing as not communicating... it's not if we're going to send something out, it's when."

The district avoids using social media for crisis communication, preferring more direct methods like text messages and emails. This strategy is based on feedback from parents who prefer receiving information via text or email rather than phone calls. "We don't put crisis type

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stuff on social media... we send that in a text message," Comm. 1 explained, emphasizing the importance of adapting communication methods to the preferences of stakeholders.

In terms of decision-making, Comm. 1 discussed the importance of timely and accurate communication. They explained that decisions about when and what to communicate are made with consideration of the details available and the potential impact on stakeholders. "It's all about the timing and the messaging," Comm. 1 stated. The district also conducts regular professional development to ensure that all staff are prepared to handle communications during crises, highlighting the necessity of continuous learning and adaptation.

Comm. 1 emphasized the role of the school board in decision-making, noting that the superintendent keeps board members informed as decisions are being made. This approach helps maintain transparency and trust. "Our superintendent does a good job at keeping them informed and giving them the information as much information as they want," Comm. 1 noted.

One of the significant challenges highlighted by Comm. 1 was dealing with outdated data in the district's communication systems. They explained an incident where outdated contact information caused issues with parent-teacher communication, emphasizing the need for accurate data management. "We had people that haven't had custody of their kids in ten years that were all of a sudden adding to their parent teacher communication via email," Comm. 1 recounted, illustrating the complexities involved in managing large datasets.

Overall, Comm. 1's narrative provided a detailed view of the robust communication structures, practices, and decision-making processes in place in District 4D. Their approach underscores the importance of clear, consistent, and timely communication, supported by well-defined protocols and continuous professional development to manage crises effectively. This interview corroborates the insights provided by Supt. 4, highlighting the cohesive and strategic

communication framework within District 4D. Both interviews demonstrate a unified approach to crisis management, emphasizing collaboration and the importance of maintaining strong communication channels to ensure the district's readiness and resilience in the face of various challenges.

Communication Structures of District 4D. District 4D places a strong emphasis on an integrated communication structure to ensure a unified response during crises, involving the superintendent, the chief communications officer (Comm. 1), and other key personnel. This structure includes a crisis management core team, as described by Supt. 4: "We called it the War Room. We were in there with the four of us because there were so many decisions to be made and the decisions had to be made so quickly." The team consists of the superintendent, the chief communications officer, the director of personnel, and the assistant superintendent of instruction.

A clear organizational chart plays a crucial role in ensuring everyone knows their responsibilities, enhancing communication effectiveness. Supt. 4 noted, "Everyone had specific roles, and we knew who was responsible for what. That level of clarity made communication seamless and ensured no detail was overlooked." The role of the communication leader is pivotal in managing media interactions and ensuring coordinated responses. Supt. 4 elaborated:

All of a sudden, you've got all the media on you wanting a comment, you've got this, you've got that. And so, I think that's where we've now developed a better picture of, okay, I go to scenes like that, my assistant goes to scenes like that, but then I've got [Chief Communication Officer – Comm. 1], who we have it set up now where they are communicating with me.

Comm. 1 emphasized the importance of high communication expectations:

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A couple of my principals are not good at communication... and they know that and it's okay. We try to work through it and build it up, and they've gotten better. I don't think they know that our expectations are a lot higher. They're just used to, you know, us having high expectations for communication.

Comm. 1 further stated, "I think it's just important to communicate. I mean, that's the whole point of our profession and our jobs is trying not to get caught up in what people are going to say or what the reaction is going to be and more of the importance of actually - the communication. That's the main piece."

The district also utilizes an emergency email group to maintain communication flow. Comm. 1 described this system: "I have an emergency email group, and so it's district and school admin and then a few other key people." For example, during a recent power outage, Comm. 1 sent updates via email and text, ensuring that all key personnel were informed promptly.

Addressing the challenges of rurality, Supt. 4 mentioned, "We're a rural district. There's some places that the pipe doesn't go for Internet, right? So when we do a survey here, we also have poverty. 75% of my parents will say, I've got Internet. Well, what they have is the Internet on their phone." This realization led to the development of a district app that allows simultaneous updates across various platforms, including the website, Facebook, Instagram, text, and phone calls, which Supt. 4 highlighted as crucial for effective communication, especially during crises.

Comm. 1 further explained their strategy for crisis communication, emphasizing the reliance on text messages and the district app over social media for sensitive information. Supt. 4 reflected on the past methods and the advantages of the new system:

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With that app, I mean, simultaneously we can update our website, Facebook, Instagram, send a text, make a call just like that, you know? And that's what I wanted was a platform where we, you know, the real intention to communicate the great things we're doing.

This platform has been invaluable during crises like COVID-19 or power outages, allowing for immediate communication with parents.

District 4D's communication structure is based on a cohesive core team with well-defined roles and responsibilities, ensuring swift decision-making and effective crisis management. The emergency email group further enhances communication flow between the district and school administration.

Communication Practices of District 4D: District 4D employs a collaborative approach to communication, integrating feedback from various stakeholders and adapting strategies to the crisis at hand. The district prioritizes transparency and aims to maintain trust within the community through consistent and strategic messaging.

Supt. 4 emphasized the importance of transparent and honest communication: "We had to communicate early. We had to communicate often. We had to be very honest and very upfront." This approach builds trust within the community, as stakeholders appreciate timely and accurate information. Comm. 1 added, "There's no such thing as not communicating. There's no such thing as not sending something out. And so it's definitely a timing thing for us." They believe that transparency builds trust and fosters a sense of community, essential for effective crisis management.

Adaptability and flexibility are also crucial. Supt. 4 highlighted the need to be nimble in response to changing information:

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We knew that the information was going to change. And so we were going to have to be nimble enough to say okay we just spent three months putting this procedure into place, and then in a week that procedure is now gone.

Comm. 1 mentioned that their plans include provisions for larger-scale events and emphasized the importance of keeping everyone in the loop: "We have plans in place for larger-scale events and have talked about who would be where or what our response would be."

District 4D uses a multi-channel communication approach to ensure consistent messaging across various platforms. Supt. 4 explained, "With the app we developed, we can simultaneously update our website, Facebook, Instagram, send a text, and make a call just like that." Comm. 1 added, "We also send a text message to our admin group. And so I'm kind of a key person in that."

Consistency in messaging is another key practice. Supt. 4 noted the importance of regular communication during crises:

The power is out. They anticipate a couple of hours. We're going to give it a couple of hours to see. And, you know, just kind of that constant communication with them. And so, you know, those are some general things with crises.

Comm. 1 shared feedback from parents who appreciated the regular updates:

We were regularly communicating with our parents and we got feedback from that. They were, you know, there was stuff all over social media where parents were just consistently, you know, thanking for, 'I got ten text messages, but it made me feel better because, you know, I regularly got an update from my school or my school principal that, you know, we're fine.'

District 4D's communication practices emphasize transparency, adaptability, and collaboration. The district uses a multi-channel approach, ensuring consistent messaging across various platforms while remaining responsive to changing information.

Decision-Making Factors of District 4D: District 4D's decision-making factors emphasize a proactive and strategic approach during crises. The district values predefined protocols and prioritizes safety and security above all else.

Supt. 4 discussed the approach to decision-making, highlighting the importance of consulting board policies and seeking legal opinions when necessary:

But I think the thing that comes into decision making in some crises depending on what it is, is what does your board policy say. And so, you know, while we've got all those things in place, it's kind of my role, first of all, to consult board policy and then that plays a lot in my day-to-day decision making is - what does our policy say; then does it go to the next step of do I need our lawyer's opinion on it?

Comm. 1 emphasized the need for timely communication:

I think it's definitely, you have to think about everybody involved from the communications side, I feel like we have learned that there's no such thing as not communicating. There's no such thing as not sending something out. And so, it's definitely a timing thing for us. It's not if we're going to send something out, it's when.

The predefined protocols ensure that decision-making is structured and efficient. Supt. 4 stated, "We've got our protocols. So, some of the decision-making was done prior to. But in the face of it, you know, we don't need everybody's voice."

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Safety and security are top priorities for District 4D. Supt. 4 explained, "For us, I think making sure that safety and security are first is going to outweigh how we communicate or when we communicate." Comm. 1 added, "They understand that protection piece that we're just trying to do what's best for our kids and our staff."

Inclusive decision-making involves consulting with various stakeholders to ensure comprehensive strategies. Supt. 4 stated, "Having people around you that help you see the blind spots is key." They also emphasized the importance of seeking opinions and feedback: "Even just with general communication - is that step-by-step process of first of all, I had to learn that, you know, while you're the leader, you still need to get other people's opinion and feedback." Comm. 1 echoed this sentiment, saying, "We try to keep everyone in the loop, so we're used to that procedure of letting everybody know everything."

Balancing information and managing expectations are critical aspects of their decision-making process. Supt. 4 noted, "We're intentionally honest, but we're not giving all the information in a text or an email." Comm. 1 highlighted the importance of ensuring key people receive the information: "We regularly look at how many of our text messages are going through and ensure all key people receive the information."

District 4D's decision-making factors prioritize safety and security through predefined protocols. An inclusive approach involving expert teams and stakeholders ensures decisions are strategic and comprehensive.

District 4D Summary. Superintendent Supt. 4 and Comm. 1's approach to crisis management in District 4D is characterized by a collaborative communication structure, proactive communication practices, and inclusive decision-making that prioritizes safety and adaptability. The district's clear protocols and cohesive leadership team ensure effective and

timely crisis response. The perspectives shared by both Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 corroborate each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of District 4D's strategic communication framework.

Cross-Case Analysis

This section conducts a cross-case analysis of how each of the four school districts (1A, 2B, 3C, and 4D) address communication structures, communication practices, and decision-making factors during crises. By examining the similarities and differences between the districts, this analysis aims to identify patterns that can contribute to empirical generalizability.

The following tables provide a comparative overview of the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors across the four districts studied. Table 4.1 presents the communication structures, Table 4.2 details the communication practices, and Table 4.3 summarizes the decision-making factors. These tables highlight both commonalities and differences, providing a foundation for the cross-case analysis narrative.

Table 4.1

Communication Structures

| District | Structure | Centralized Communication Teams | Defined Roles and Responsibilities | Size of Communication Teams | Media Relations |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|---|
| District 1A | Centralized Communication | Core team led by superintendent and Public Information Officer (PIO) | PIO and leadership team streamline communication efforts | Small leadership team | PIO directly handles media inquiries |
| District 2B | Distributed Leadership Team | 14-member leadership team with principals having direct lines to superintendent | Principals and leadership team follow a structured communication plan | Larger 14-member leadership team | Principals and leadership team coordinate with superintendent |
| District 3C | Compact Crisis Team | Compact decision-making team | Decision-making team includes superintendent, assistant superintendents, and Director of Personnel | Compact core team | Director of Secondary Education doubles as PR officer |
| District 4D | Centralized Communication | Core team led by superintendent and chief communications officer | Superintendent, chief communications officer, director of personnel, and assistant superintendent of instruction | Four-member core team | Chief communications officer manages media relations |

Table 4.2

Communication Practices

| District | Transparency and Honesty Practices | Multi-Channel Approach | Use of Social Media | Frequency and Timing of Communication |
|--------------------|--|---|---|--|
| District 1A | Consistent and clear messaging through PIO | Communicates via email, voicemail, and district website. Uses PIO's media relations network | Avoids posting crisis-related information on social media | Prefers collective decision-making before issuing statements |
| District 2B | Open communication with principals and staff | Communicates via email, voicemail, and district website. Relies on a Level Four system for | Primarily uses text messages, avoids sharing sensitive | Ensures principals receive communication first before the public |

| | | | | |
|--------------------|---|--|--|--|
| | | crises, including text messages and email | information on social media | |
| District 3C | Transparency and honesty through multi-channel communication | Communicates via email, voicemail, and district website | Regularly updates stakeholders through multiple social media platforms | Sends weekly updates, with frequent messages during crises |
| District 4D | Early, frequent, and honest communication, conducts regular surveys | Communicates via email, voicemail, and district website. Uses district app to update website, social media, and text messaging during crises | Uses social media strategically but avoids sharing confidential crisis information | Maintains regular updates through email and text messages, balancing timing with available information |

Table 4.3

Decision-Making Factors

| District | Prioritization of Safety and Security | Protocols and Procedures | Decision-Making Process | Stakeholder Involvement |
|--------------------|--|---|---|---|
| District 1A | Ensures decisions are thoughtful and not driven by emotion | Relies on a predefined crisis communication plan | Uses a collective decision-making process involving key personnel | Engages the leadership team in decision-making |
| District 2B | Relies on predefined protocols, prioritizes safety over communication timing | Follows a structured crisis communication plan developed with input from principals | Prefers quick, decisive action based on established protocols | Involves principals and the 14-member leadership team |
| District 3C | Uses expert input to guide safety decisions | Uses a compact decision-making team with predefined roles | Consults expert teams before making strategic decisions | Engaged parents, health professionals, and expert teams |
| District 4D | Emphasizes the importance of accurate and timely information | Follows protocols set by a crisis communication plan set by the crisis management core team | Emphasizes inclusivity and flexibility in decision-making | Involves key personnel and seeks feedback from principals |

Communication Structures

In examining the communication structures of the four districts, several commonalities and differences emerge, as shown in Table 4.1. Each district employed a distinct communication structure tailored to its specific needs and challenges. District 1A used a centralized communication structure with a core team led by the superintendent and PIO, as stated by Supt.

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1, "When there is one person we've learned, and it took a little while, but we've learned that now they contact that person for the most part." This structure ensures that all external communications are managed through a single point of contact, enhancing clarity and consistency. In District 2B, a distributed leadership team is employed, consisting of a 14-member team involving principals and district administrators. This structure allows for a comprehensive response mechanism. Supt. 2 explained, "Everybody's got a role when something happens," highlighting the shared responsibilities and collaborative decision-making process. District 3C utilizes a compact crisis team comprising key administrators and a part-time PIO. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Supt. 3 described this structure as essential for quick decision-making, stating, "The four of us basically went into a room for about a year...because there were so many decisions to be made and the decisions had to be made so quickly." This streamlined approach allowed for efficient crisis management and rapid dissemination of information. District 4D employs a centralized communication structure, much like District 1A, characterized by a collaborative approach involving the Chief Communications Officer (Comm. 1) and other key personnel. Supt. 4 emphasized the importance of clear roles, stating, "Everyone had specific roles, and we knew who was responsible for what."

All four districts have centralized communication teams that play a critical role in coordinating crisis communication. District 1A, led by a Public Information Officer (PIO), emphasizes streamlined and consistent communication. Supt. 1 mentioned, "Our PIO handles all media inquiries to ensure a coherent structure for crisis communication." District 2B employs a 14-member leadership team where principals have direct lines to the superintendent. This structure ensures efficient information flow. Supt. 2 highlighted, "We have a leadership team where each member knows their role, ensuring that information is channeled correctly." In

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District 3C, a compact decision-making team is responsible for crisis communication, ensuring quick decision-making and efficient information dissemination. Supt. 3 stated, "Our core team manages crisis communication with well-defined roles to make sure decisions are made swiftly."

District 4D operates with a "War Room" core team led by the superintendent and chief communications officer. Comm. 1 explained, "We have a clear organizational chart and use an emergency email group to keep communication direct and efficient."

Despite these similarities, differences in the size of communication teams and media relations approaches are evident. District 1A relies heavily on the PIO and a small leadership team, while District 2B's larger 14-member leadership team manages crisis communication. District 3C operates with a compact core team that enables quick decision-making, and District 4D functions with a four-member core team. In terms of media relations, District 1A's PIO directly handles media inquiries, while District 2B's principals and the leadership team coordinate with the superintendent. District 3C's Director of Secondary Education doubles as a PR officer, and District 4D's chief communications officer manages media relations.

Communication Practices

As detailed in Table 4.2, all districts emphasize transparency and honesty in their communication practices, although the methods vary. In District 1A, Supt. 1 stressed the importance of consistent messaging through the PIO. "We believe in keeping our messaging consistent and clear through our PIO," Supt. 1 noted. District 2B focuses on open communication with principals and staff before public release. Supt. 2 mentioned, "We make sure our principals are informed first, ensuring a united front before communicating with the public." In District 3C, transparency and honesty are prioritized through multi-channel communication. Supt. 3 shared, "We send weekly updates and use multiple channels to keep everyone informed." District 4D

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employs early, frequent, and upfront communication, regularly surveying stakeholders to ensure alignment. Comm. 1 explained, "We emphasize early and frequent communication, and we regularly survey our stakeholders to ensure our strategies are effective."

However, differences exist in the use of social media, frequency, and timing of communication. District 1A avoids posting crisis-related information on social media, while District 2B primarily uses text messages and avoids sharing sensitive information on social media. Supt. 1 stated, "We avoid social media for crisis communication, relying on direct methods like text and email." District 3C regularly updates stakeholders through multiple social media platforms, and District 4D uses social media strategically but avoids sharing confidential crisis information. Regarding the frequency and timing of communication, District 1A prefers collective decision-making before issuing statements, District 2B ensures principals receive communication first before the public, District 3C sent weekly updates with frequent messages during crises, and District 4D maintains regular updates through email and text messages, balancing timing with available information.

Decision-Making Factors

Safety and security are prioritized in decision-making across all districts, as summarized in Table 4.3. Supt. 1 of District 1A emphasized, "We ensure our decisions are thoughtful and not driven by emotion." Supt. 2 of District 2B relies on predefined protocols, stating, "We prioritize safety over timing in our communications, following our structured plans." In District 3C, Supt. 3 uses expert input to guide decisions, highlighting, "We consult with experts to ensure our decisions are based on sound advice." Similarly, in District 4D, Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize the importance of accurate and timely information. Comm. 1 mentioned, "Our decisions are based on the best available information, ensuring accuracy and timeliness."

All districts follow established protocols during crises. District 1A and 2B rely on predefined crisis communication plans, while District 3C uses a core decision-making team with predefined roles. District 4D follows protocols set by its crisis management core team. Comm. 1 explained, "We have clear protocols that guide our actions during crises."

The decision-making processes vary among the districts. District 1A uses a collective decision-making process involving key personnel. Supt. 1 explained, "We involve our leadership team in all major decisions to ensure they are well thought out." In District 2B, Supt. 2 prefers quick, decisive action based on established protocols, stating, "We act swiftly but follow our protocols to the letter." District 3C involves parents, health professionals, and expert teams in their decision-making process. Supt. 3 noted, "We engage various stakeholders to ensure our decisions are well-rounded." District 4D emphasizes inclusivity and flexibility in decision-making. Comm. 1 shared, "We involve key personnel and seek feedback from principals to ensure our decisions are inclusive and flexible."

The cross-case analysis reveals both commonalities and distinctions in how each district approaches communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors. Despite varying team sizes and approaches, all districts prioritize transparent communication, structured decision-making, and the safety of students and staff.

Summary and Transition

This chapter provided a comprehensive analysis of the data collected through interviews with superintendents and communication leaders across four school districts. The results were organized to address the central research question: *How do superintendents and communication leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?*

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Through detailed case studies and cross-case analysis, this chapter examined how each district approaches communication structures, communication practices, and decision-making factors. Despite variations in team size, media relations strategies, and decision-making processes, common themes emerged. Each district emphasized the importance of transparency, honesty, and inclusive decision-making in building trust and mitigating misinformation during crises. The prioritization of safety and security, development of comprehensive crisis communication plans, and proactive planning were also consistently highlighted.

The cross-case analysis identified both similarities and differences in how districts approach crisis communication. All four districts prioritize transparency, structured decision-making, and the safety of students and staff. However, the differences in communication structures, practices, and decision-making processes provide unique perspectives on effective crisis management strategies. In the next chapter, the findings will be integrated with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model to provide a deeper understanding of crisis communication and leadership in educational settings. Chapter five will synthesize the results, discuss their implications, and offer recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the final step of the study by integrating the findings with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model. The chapter begins with a summary and review of the study and discusses how the research questions were addressed through the analysis. The findings are then interpreted within the context of the Four-Frame Model, followed by a cross-case comparison. Implications for practitioners and the field of study are outlined, along with recommendations for future research.

Discussion of the Topic/Review of the Study

The study sought to explore how superintendents and communication leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment. The research was guided by the following central question:

- *How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?*

This qualitative multi-case study was conducted across four school districts in South Carolina. Superintendents and communication leaders were interviewed to identify the strategies and practices used during crisis management. The analysis used NVivo 14 for coding and categorizing themes, guided by Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model. Table 5.1 provides details related to these four frames.

Table 5.1

Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model for reframing organizations.

| Frame | Organization focus |
|----------------------|---|
| Structural Frame | This frame focuses on the organization’s formal roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, rules, and procedures. This frame views organizations as machines designed to achieve specific goals efficiently. This frame emphasizes clarity in roles and relationships and seeks to create a well-organized and coordinated structure. |
| Human Resource Frame | This frame focuses on the people within the organization, their skills, needs, motivations, and relationships. It views organizations as communities where individuals’ well-being, development, and engagement are vital for success. This frame emphasizes open communication, professional growth, and alignment of individual and organizational goals. |
| Political Frame | This frame focuses on power dynamics, interests, conflicts, and alliances within the organization. It views organizations as arenas where different groups compete for resources and influence. This frame emphasizes understanding diverse perspectives, managing conflicts, and navigating political dynamics to achieve organizational goals. |
| Symbolic Frame | This frame focuses on the organization’s culture, values, symbols, rituals, and meaning-making. It views organizations as theaters where actions and symbols communicate shared beliefs and define reality. This frame emphasizes creating a meaningful narrative and using symbolism to shape perceptions and create a sense of identity. |

Discussion of the Results

This section provides a comprehensive discussion of the results, focusing on how each school district addresses communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors during crises. The analysis is guided by Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, which offers a structured framework for interpreting the results through the lenses of the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. The following subsections analyze how each school district (1A, 2B, 3C, and 4D) approaches communication structures, practices, and decision-

making factors. The analysis reveals key themes and patterns across the districts while also highlighting the unique strategies employed by each one.

Integrating the findings with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model

In aligning the findings of this study with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, it was evident that the approaches to crisis communication adopted by the school districts in this study exemplify the interplay of structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. These frames provided a comprehensive lens through which to analyze and understand the varied strategies implemented by each district to manage crises effectively.

Structural Frame. Centralized communication structures were pivotal in each district's crisis response, demonstrating the critical role of organized, clear directives in managing emergencies. For example, District 1A's use of a Public Information Officer to coordinate media interactions underscores the strategic deployment of structured communication roles to enhance clarity and efficiency—a principle supported by Weick and Quinn (1999), who emphasized the necessity of formal structures in facilitating rapid response during crises. Supt. 1 highlighted, "When there is one person, we've learned... they contact that person for the most part," illustrating the effectiveness of a centralized contact point. Similarly, District 2B's extensive leadership team ensures that communication flow was both efficient and strategically aligned with crisis response needs, supported by the views of Weick and Sutcliffe (2011) on the importance of adaptive structures in crisis situations. Supt. 2 emphasized, "Our principals have a direct line to me. They get me whenever they want me," indicating the direct and clear lines of communication integral to their structure. District 4D's structure was evident as Comm. 1 shared, "We've had to implement board policy that deals with communication and crisis management, but far as the specific steps, I think it is for us, is to definitely trying to use our resources to put

people in the right place.” These examples illustrate how structural clarity and defined roles can significantly enhance a district's ability to manage crises effectively.

Human Resource Frame. This frame focuses on the importance of relationships and human capital in crisis management. The districts' emphasis on transparency and collective decision-making reflected an understanding that addressing human needs is essential during crises. Morgeson et al. (2010) suggested that empathetic leadership and open communication are pillars of effective crisis management as such strategies address the human elements crucial to maintaining trust and morale in high-pressure situations. For instance, District 3C's commitment to regular, honest updates supports the cultivation of trust and maintains morale, as noted by Allen and Caillouet (1994), who argued that transparent communication is critical in reducing uncertainties among stakeholders during crises. Supt. 3 noted, "We had to communicate early, we had to communicate often, we had to be very honest and very upfront," underscoring the district's dedication to transparency. Similarly, Supt. 4 of District 4D remarked, "We had to be very honest and very upfront," emphasizing the importance of clear and honest communication. Additionally, Supt. 2 stated, "I think making sure that safety and security are first is going to outweigh how we communicate or when we communicate," highlighting the prioritization of human safety as a crucial aspect of their crisis management approach. These practices highlight the critical role of human-centric strategies in managing crises and maintaining stakeholder trust.

Political Frame. From the political frame, the districts' strategies involved managing the complex interplay of stakeholder interests and external pressures, crucial for maintaining operational stability and public trust. The political dynamics of crisis management involve navigating power structures and stakeholder interests, as seen in the districts' strategic media interactions and resource negotiations. The strategic handling of media inquiries in District 1A,

as well as the conflict navigation strategies in District 2B, are reflective of political insight as outlined by Boin and Hart (2003) in their discussion on the role of political acuity in crisis management. Supt. 1 described, "The people who would be deemed as being in positions of authority. They want to know something's coming," highlighting the importance of keeping key stakeholders informed. Comm. 1 noted, "Our schools have had to, and principals have had to work together a lot more to kind of compromise on who was going to take the lead, on what. Or like if it impacted multiple schools," emphasizing the collaborative approach to managing stakeholder dynamics. Additionally, the strategic stakeholder engagement practices in District 2B and District 4D reflected Ferris et al.'s (2005) insights into the importance of political skills in managing external and internal pressures effectively. Supt. 2 noted, "We're intentionally honest but we're not giving all the information in a text or an email," indicating the careful management of information dissemination. Supt. 4 stated, "We made a decision that we think is best for the district," reflecting the importance of making strategic decisions that balance various stakeholder interests. These examples underscore the necessity for district leaders to be politically astute in order to effectively manage crises and maintain stakeholder confidence.

Symbolic Frame. The use of communication as a tool to reinforce organizational values and instill a sense of unity was prominent in the districts' responses. The symbolic use of messaging to articulate a collective identity and mission during crises aligns with Smircich and Morgan's (1982) perspective on the power of symbolism in leadership. This is particularly evident in District 4D, where the emphasis on cohesive and value-driven communication practices enhances communal bonds and fosters a shared sense of purpose during challenging times. Comm. 1 noted, "for us, our motto is pride, purpose, and passion. So, we try to be... to keep that pride, sense in everything, you know, that unity, that pride, that community aspect,

obviously everything has... messages have a purpose," reflecting the district's focus on maintaining a unified community spirit. Supt. 1 of District 1A shared,

We changed our mission statement too... In the past it had been to, you know, 'produce good students basically who were going to be, you know, good community members in the future'. But we just we put 'to partner with families to create'. Because I do believe that firmly that the school districts can't change the world. Families change the world.

This highlights the symbolic importance of partnering with families. Similarly, Supt. 2 emphasized, "I needed to be more consistent with putting that mission out there. So, I do that in all of my communications," demonstrating the significance of consistently reinforcing the mission in communication. The leaders in each district utilized communication to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and to rally community support during times of crisis. Recent research mirrors these findings and suggests that there is a benefit from aligning their decision-making with their institutions' missions and values (Liu et al., 2022). This integration of symbolic elements in communication strategies underscores the importance of aligning messages with core values to foster resilience and unity during crises.

Findings Across All Districts. The integration of all four of Bolman and Deal's frames across the case studies suggests a comprehensive approach to crisis management, where each frame contributes uniquely to the districts' strategies. Each frame not only addresses specific aspects of crisis communication but also complements the others, creating a robust framework for managing crises. The structural and human resource frames provide the foundation for effective operations and stakeholder relations, respectively, while the political and symbolic frames address the broader socio-political dynamics and cultural aspects of crisis management.

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This holistic approach not only aligns with the theoretical framework provided by Bolman and Deal but also illustrates practical applications in real-world settings, offering insights for enhancing crisis management in educational environments. For instance, the structural frame ensures clear roles and organized communication channels, as evidenced by District 1A's use of a Public Information Officer to streamline media interactions. The human resource frame emphasizes the importance of transparency and collective decision-making, which builds trust and morale among stakeholders, as seen in District 3C's regular, honest updates.

The political frame involves managing stakeholder interests and external pressures to maintain stability and trust. This is exemplified by District 2B's strategic handling of media inquiries and resource negotiations. Additionally, the symbolic frame highlights the power of reinforcing organizational values and unity through communication, as demonstrated by District 4D's emphasis on value-driven messaging.

This synthesis is supported by the broader literature, which suggests that integrating multiple perspectives, as advocated by Bolman and Deal, can enhance the efficacy and depth of organizational leadership in crisis situations (Bolman & Deal, 2021). By considering the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic aspects of crisis management, school districts can develop more resilient and adaptive strategies.

In summary, the application of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model to the crisis management strategies of the studied districts provides a rich, multi-dimensional understanding of the dynamics at play. It underscores the necessity of a balanced approach that considers organizational structure, human relations, political savvy, and symbolic power in crafting effective responses to crises. This integrated perspective not only aligns with theoretical

frameworks but also offers practical insights for enhancing crisis management in educational settings. Figure 5.1 and 5.2 provides a detailed display showing the integration of findings with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model across the four school districts (1A, 2B, 3C, 4D) in terms of their crisis communication strategies.

Figure 5.1
Four-Frame Model Across All Districts – Communication Structure and Practices

| Communication Structures and Practices | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| | Structural Frame | Human Resource Frame | Political Frame | Symbolic Frame |
| District 1A | The district employs a centralized structure led by a Public Information Officer (PIO) who coordinates all media inquiries, ensuring streamlined and consistent communication. Supt. 1 emphasized the role of the PIO in creating a coherent structure for crisis communication. | The PIO ensures transparent and consistent messaging, with Supt. 1 emphasizing collective decision-making to foster a supportive environment for staff. | The PIO manages media relations to maintain positive public perception while balancing power dynamics among stakeholders. | Supt. 1 uses consistent messaging to reinforce organizational values and instill a sense of unity and purpose. |
| District 2B | The district's communication structure includes a 14-member leadership team, with principals having a direct line to the superintendent. This structure ensures that information flows efficiently, prioritizing putting the right people in the right places. | Supt. 2 maintains open communication with principals and staff, ensuring that the leadership team is informed first before releasing information to the public. | Supt. 2's communication practices involve strategically managing conflicts and resource allocation to maintain stakeholder trust. | Supt. 2 aligns communication practices with district values to create a cohesive organizational culture. |
| District 3C | A core decision-making team is responsible for managing crisis communication. Roles are well-defined to ensure quick decision-making and efficient information dissemination. | Supt. 3 prioritizes transparency and honesty through multi-channel communication, sending weekly updates to keep all stakeholders informed. | Supt. 3 relies on expert input to navigate political pressures and maintain transparency with stakeholders. | Supt. 3 employs multi-channel communication to inspire unity and shared meaning among stakeholders. |
| District 4D | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 lead a core crisis management team with a clear organizational chart. The district uses an emergency email group to maintain a direct line of communication between district and school administration. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize early, frequent, and honest communication. The district conducts regular surveys to ensure that stakeholders are aligned with communication strategies. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 strategically manage public perception by balancing the timing and content of communication. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize the importance of symbolic elements in communication to reinforce organizational culture and shared passion. |
| Cross-Case Analysis | The structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames are all evident in the communication practices of each district. Each district prioritizes streamlined communication structures to maintain consistency during crises. Superintendents and communication leaders emphasize transparency, consistency, and strategic management to foster a supportive culture and maintain public trust. | | | |

Figure 5.2
Four-Frame Model Across All Districts – Decision-Making Factors

| Decision-Making Factors | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| | Structural Frame | Human Resource Frame | Political Frame | Symbolic Frame |
| District 1A | Supt. 1 uses a collective decision-making process, involving key personnel to ensure thoughtful and strategic decisions. | Supt. 1 ensures that decisions are made collectively, valuing the input of key personnel. | Supt. 1 balances stakeholder power dynamics by involving the PIO and leadership team in decision-making. | Supt. 1 uses decision-making processes to reinforce organizational values and build trust. |
| District 2B | Supt. 2 relies on predefined protocols and a structured division of roles to streamline decision-making. | Supt. 2 prioritizes quick, decisive action while ensuring principals and staff are included in the process. | Supt. 2 navigates political pressures by maintaining strong relationships with principals and key stakeholders. | Supt. 2 aligns decision-making with district values to maintain unity and cohesion. |
| District 3C | Supt. 3 consults expert teams to ensure strategic and evidence-based decisions. | Supt. 3 involves parents, health professionals, and stakeholders in decision-making. | Supt. 3 consults expert teams to manage political challenges and ensure transparency. | Supt. 3 uses inclusive decision-making to inspire shared meaning and purpose. |
| District 4D | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize the importance of predefined protocols and inclusive decision-making. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 involve key personnel and principals to ensure inclusive decision-making. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize inclusive decision-making to balance power dynamics. | Supt. 4 and Comm. 1 emphasize symbolism to build a cohesive and supportive culture. |
| Cross-Case Analysis | All four frames are evident in the decision-making factors of each district. The structural frame is consistently employed through predefined protocols and roles, while the human resource frame is reflected in inclusive decision-making. The political frame is evident in the strategic management of power dynamics, and the symbolic frame is used to reinforce organizational culture and values | | | |

Addressing the Research Questions

In examining how superintendents and communications leaders utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage crises within PK-12 public school districts, this dissertation reveals multifaceted strategies that underscore the complexity of crisis

management in educational settings. Each of the outlined research questions are addressed as follows:

Main Research Question: *How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment?*

The findings indicate that effective crisis management heavily relies on structured communication systems, strategic practices, and thoughtful decision-making. Each district in this study uses strategic employment of communication structures that include centralized command systems and clear protocols that facilitate swift and effective communication during crises. Superintendents and communications leaders leverage these structured channels to ensure accuracy and consistency in the messages disseminated to stakeholders, thereby upholding the integrity and trust of the district during turbulent times. These findings are supported by the work of Johansen et al. (2012), who stress the importance of structured communication strategies in enhancing the capacity of schools to respond to crises effectively. Similarly, the emphasis on strategic decision-making aligns with the recommendations of Muffet-Willett and Kruse (2009), who highlight the need for adaptive decision-making strategies in educational settings during crises.

Sub-question 1: *What specific communication structures and practices are most commonly utilized by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations?*

The study identifies centralized communication structures as pivotal in managing crisis situations effectively. Communication practices across the studied districts show a preference for multi-channel approaches that ensure broad reach and accessibility, reinforcing transparency and

immediacy. Practices such as regular updates, direct communications from leaders, and the use of digital platforms to manage real-time information flow are prevalent. The practice of maintaining open lines of communication with all stakeholders, as noted in the districts studied, aligns with Quinn's (2018) assertion that transparency and openness are critical for maintaining trust and ensuring effective crisis communication. These practices are not only tailored to the immediacy of crisis response but also to maintaining an ongoing dialogue with all district stakeholders.

Communication Structures

The analysis revealed that the communication structures in the studied districts varied significantly yet shared common features that facilitated effective crisis management. These structures can be categorized into three main types: Centralized, Collaborative, and Hierarchical. Each type played a crucial role in ensuring that the districts could respond swiftly and effectively to crises.

Centralized Structures. In districts with centralized structures, a single point of contact, such as a Public Information Officer (PIO), coordinated all communication efforts. This structure was particularly effective in ensuring consistency and clarity of messages. For example, District 1A utilized a PIO, and District 4D empowered a Chief Communications Officer to manage all external communications, streamlining the process and avoiding confusion.

Collaborative Structures. Some districts employed collaborative structures, where a core team of leaders, including the superintendent, assistant superintendents, and communication officers, worked together to manage crisis communication. This approach was evident in District 3C, where the superintendent emphasized the importance of a cohesive team in making quick,

informed decisions during crises. This structure allowed for diverse perspectives and shared responsibilities in managing communication.

Hierarchical Structures. In other districts, a more hierarchical approach was taken, with clear lines of authority and responsibility. For instance, in District 2B, the superintendent had direct lines of communication with school principals, ensuring that instructions were followed promptly and accurately. This structure facilitated swift decision-making and clear dissemination of directives during crises.

Communication Practices

Effective communication practices were essential in managing crises, with several key strategies emerging from the analysis. These strategies ensured that districts could maintain transparency and trust with their stakeholders. The study highlighted the importance of proactive communication, the use of technology, and community engagement.

Proactive Communication. Districts that prioritized proactive communication were better prepared to handle crises. This involved regular updates and transparency with stakeholders, as seen in District 4D, where the communication leader ensured continuous engagement with the community. Proactive communication helped in setting expectations and providing timely information to all stakeholders.

Use of Technology. The integration of technology played a crucial role in enhancing communication efficiency. Districts utilized various platforms, such as social media, mobile apps, and automated alert systems, to disseminate information rapidly. For example, District 3C's use of a district-wide mobile app allowed for immediate updates during emergencies. This technological integration ensured that information could be shared quickly and efficiently.

Community Engagement. Engaging the community through forums, town hall meetings, and regular newsletters helped build trust and maintain open lines of communication. District 1A's and 2B's practice of holding frequent meetings with parents and community members exemplified this approach. These engagements provided opportunities for stakeholders to voice their concerns and receive direct responses from district leaders.

Sub-question 2: *In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical framework of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model?*

Decision-making within the districts reflects a deep alignment with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, where leaders not only respond to the immediate logistical challenges (Structural Frame) but also address the human aspect (Human Resource Frame), navigate the political landscape (Political Frame), and infuse their actions with symbolism (Symbolic Frame) to maintain morale and communal unity. The alignment with this model showcases a balanced approach to managing the multifaceted nature of crises, integrating practical responses with a keen awareness of the socio-political and cultural dimensions of their school communities.

The study's findings suggest that leaders in educational settings, particularly superintendents and communication leaders, must develop a multifaceted approach to crisis management. By leveraging Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, leaders can better navigate the complexities of crises, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive response. This adaptability not only aligns with the theoretical framework but also provides practical insights for enhancing crisis management strategies in educational environments.

Decision-Making Factors

Several factors influenced the decision-making processes of superintendents and communication leaders during crises. These factors included adaptability, stakeholder

involvement, and the importance of transparency and trust. Understanding these factors helped in developing effective crisis management strategies.

Adaptability. Leaders who demonstrated adaptability were more effective in managing crises. This involved being flexible and responsive to changing situations. For instance, in District 2B, the superintendent highlighted the importance of adjusting strategies based on real-time feedback. Adaptability allowed leaders to respond to unforeseen challenges swiftly.

Stakeholder Involvement. Involving stakeholders in the decision-making process was crucial for ensuring that all perspectives were considered. District 4D's inclusive approach, where the communication leader regularly consulted with teachers, parents, and local authorities, underscored the value of stakeholder input. This involvement ensured that decisions were well-informed and widely supported.

Transparency and Trust. Maintaining transparency and building trust were fundamental to effective crisis management. Leaders who communicated openly and honestly with their communities fostered a sense of trust and collaboration. This was evident in District 3C, where the superintendent's commitment to transparency helped mitigate the impact of crises. Trust and transparency were key in maintaining stakeholder confidence.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that effective crisis management in PK-12 public school districts relies on structured communication systems, proactive practices, and strategic decision-making. By integrating these elements and leveraging theoretical frameworks such as Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, educational leaders can navigate crises more effectively, ensuring the safety and trust of their school communities.

These findings set the stage for the development of a logic model, which serves as a beneficial way to display the study's purposes. By reflecting theoretical propositions and

supporting practical implications, the logic model will provide a clear and organized framework for enhancing crisis management strategies. This model will help educational leaders visualize the relationships between resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes, ultimately guiding them in planning, implementing, and evaluating their crisis communication and management efforts.

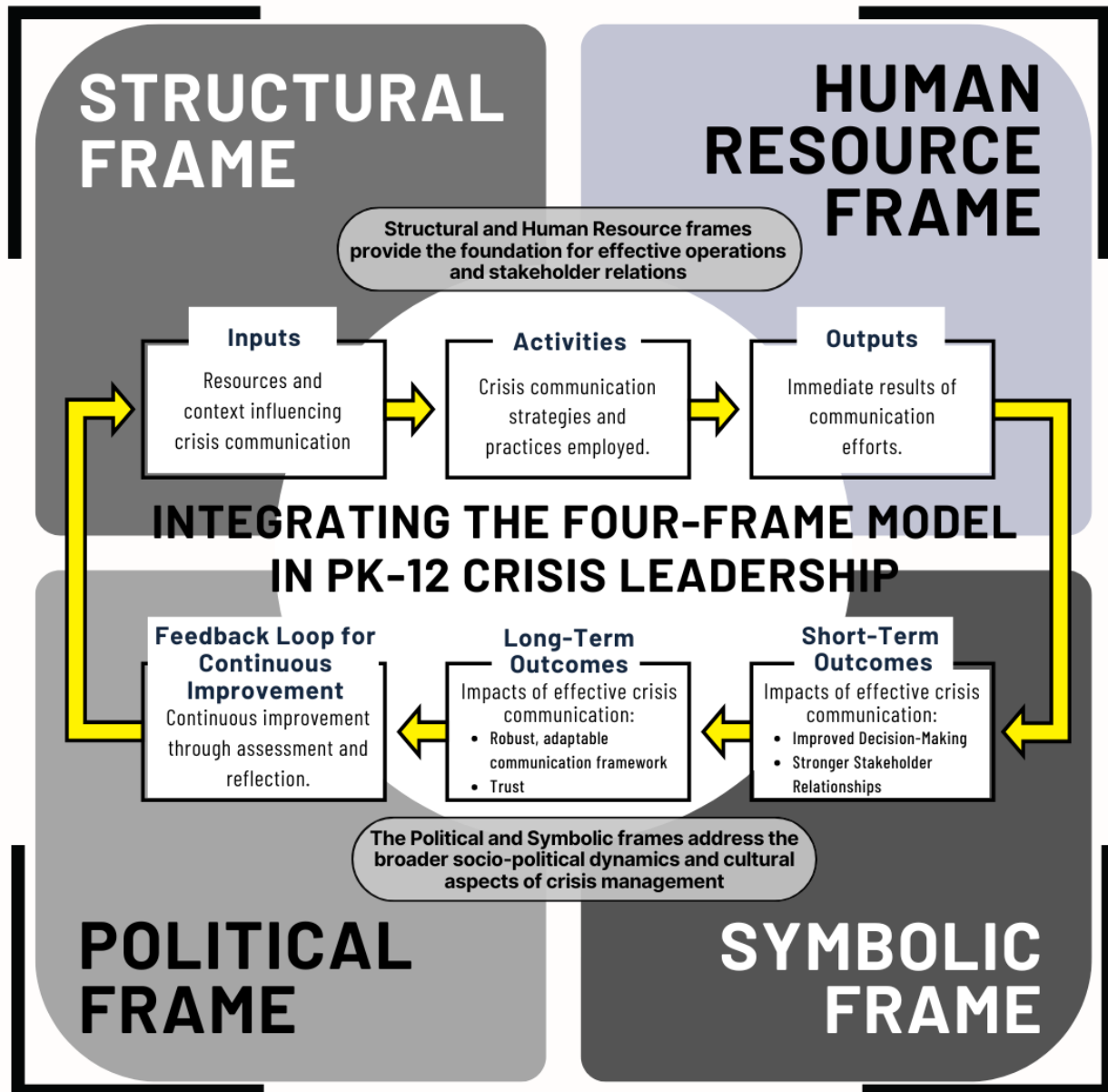
Logic Model Integrating Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model in Crisis Leadership

A logic model is beneficial for visualizing and understanding the complex processes involved in crisis management and communication within educational settings. By providing a structured representation of the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, a logic model helps administrators, educators, and stakeholders to clearly see how resources and actions lead to desired results. According to McLaughlin and Jordan (1999), logic models serve as valuable frameworks for planning, implementing, and evaluating programs, ensuring that all elements of a process are aligned towards achieving specific goals. Research has shown that logic models are particularly effective for program evaluation and improvement in educational settings. For instance, Millar et al. (2001) emphasize that using a logic model in educational programs can help in mapping out the process of change, thus providing a clear roadmap for achieving program objectives.

In the context of crisis leadership in PK-12 school districts, a logic model integrates theoretical frameworks with practical strategies, offering a comprehensive view of how crisis communication and management activities lead to improved outcomes. This structured approach not only supports the effective implementation of crisis plans but also enables continuous improvement through regular feedback and reflection. By clearly illustrating the connection between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, the logic model helps educational leaders to effectively manage crises, build resilience, and maintain trust within their communities.

Figure 5.3 presents a logic model as a visual representation to mirror the study's purposes. It reflects theoretical propositions and supports practical implications for enhancing crisis management strategies.

Figure 5.3
Logic Model Integrating Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model in Crisis Leadership



Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model provides a theoretical lens for understanding the nuances of crisis communication. A “viewfinder” allows photographers to frame their shots

accurately, showing their target through the lens. The model shown in Figure 5.3 is visually shown through a representation of a camera viewfinder containing the four frames. All four frames surround the process for integration of the four-frame model with crisis leadership as this model proposes a balanced approach to managing the multifaceted nature of crises, integrating practical responses with a keen awareness of the socio-political and cultural dimensions of their school communities.

The **Structural Frame** focuses on clear roles, communication structures, and defined protocols, ensuring efficient crisis management, as demonstrated by the centralized structures in Districts 1A and 2B. The **Human Resource** Frame highlights collaborative decision-making, empowerment, and trust-building, which is evident in the transparent and inclusive practices of Districts 3C and 4D. The **Political Frame** addresses the balancing of competing interests, power dynamics, and strategic stakeholder engagement, as seen in the media management and stakeholder trust-building strategies of all districts. The **Symbolic Frame** emphasizes mission, vision, and storytelling to maintain morale and inspire stakeholders, reflected in the consistent messaging and cultural reinforcement efforts across all districts.

The central process of the model begins with **Inputs**, foundational resources and contexts influencing crisis communication strategies. These include leadership teams that vary among school districts. It also includes predefined crisis management plans, protocols, and communication structures guiding district actions during crises, supported by communication leaders and community engagement from stakeholders such as board members, parents, law enforcement, and local media.

Activities represent specific strategies and practices employed during crisis communication. Centralized communication ensures consistent messaging across the district, led

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by a communications leader, as emphasized by Supt. 1 and Supt. 4. Proactive crisis responses involve immediate support teams providing logistical and emotional assistance, while inclusive decision-making engages principals, leadership teams, and other stakeholders, promoting comprehensive decision-making, as noted by Supt. 2. Transparent media relations involve clear and accurate messaging to maintain trust, a strategy highlighted by Supt. 3.

The model then moves to **Outputs**, capturing the immediate results of crisis communication efforts. Accurate messaging ensures consistent and reliable communication to stakeholders. Building stakeholder trust through transparency and honesty is emphasized across all districts, particularly by Supt. 4 and Comm. 1. Coordinated responses provide rapid, structured crisis management aligned with predefined protocols, ensuring effectiveness.

Outcomes describe the **short-term** and **long-term impacts** of effective crisis communication. Short-term outcomes include improved decision-making due to better information sharing and inclusive collaboration, leading to stronger stakeholder relationships. Long-term outcomes involve creating a resilient crisis communication system that can withstand future challenges and enhance organizational trust, cultivating a culture of transparency and reliability.

The **Feedback Loop** for continuous improvement underscores the importance of post-crisis reflection and debriefing, allowing districts to identify strengths and areas for improvement. By refining plans and practices based on these insights, districts can ensure continuous learning and development, enhancing their preparedness for future crises.

In conclusion, this logic model visually summarizes the integrated findings of the study and offers a comprehensive framework for enhancing crisis leadership and communication in PK-12 school districts. By mapping the theoretical propositions against practical strategies and

outcomes, the model provides a structured approach for future research and practical implementation. This integration underscores the critical role of comprehensive, multi-frame approaches in managing crises effectively within educational settings.

Implications for the Profession/Practice

The findings from this study offer valuable insights for superintendents, communication leaders, and school district administrators. Understanding the approaches and strategies utilized by the four districts can help practitioners refine their own crisis communication and leadership practices. The findings of this study underscore the importance of adaptability in leadership and the use of diverse techniques to navigate crises effectively. Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, introduced in their work "Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership" (2021), provides a robust framework for understanding and addressing organizational issues from multiple perspectives. This model suggests that leaders who rely solely on one perspective can create problems and inefficiencies within their organizations. Therefore, being adaptable and capable of drawing on all four frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—is essential for effective leadership, especially in crisis situations.

All four district leaders highlighted the importance of a centralized communication structure led by a designated team or individual. Practitioners may benefit from establishing a centralized communication team with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, which can include a communications leader and other key personnel. Developing a comprehensive crisis communication plan that outlines the flow of information and designates specific responsibilities is crucial to ensure consistent messaging. For instance, District 1A's PIO coordinates media inquiries, while District 4D's core crisis team, including their Chief Communication Officer (CCO), manages information flow efficiently.

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Transparency and honesty in communication were found to build trust and mitigate misinformation during crises. Superintendents and communication leaders may find it useful to prioritize transparent communication with stakeholders, even when full information is not yet available. This includes acknowledging uncertainties and managing expectations. Developing communication guidelines that emphasize honesty and transparency could be essential. District 3C's weekly multi-channel updates during the COVID-19 pandemic and District 4D's frequent communication practices serve as models for transparent communication.

Inclusive decision-making ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more balanced and strategic decisions. Involving key personnel, such as principals and department heads, in decision-making processes may be beneficial. Additionally, gathering feedback from stakeholders like parents, staff, and community members could enhance decision-making. Establishing regular meetings with key personnel and forming advisory committees that include parents, health professionals, and other stakeholders may improve decision-making processes. District 3C's expert teams they developed during the pandemic and District 2B's direct line to principals reflect successful inclusive decision-making approaches.

Strategic media relations play a critical role in crisis management. Managing media relations strategically helps balance external influences and maintain a positive public perception. Superintendents and communication leaders may find it advantageous to build and maintain strong relationships with media outlets to ensure accurate and timely coverage. Designating a media spokesperson to handle all media inquiries and providing training on media relations to key personnel are crucial strategies. The relationships that District 4D's CCO has been able to build with local media exemplify effective media management practices. The presence of a CCO dedicated to this role has enabled these relationships to occur.

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Multi-channel communication strategies ensure that information reaches stakeholders promptly through their preferred channels. Practitioners could consider leveraging multiple communication channels, such as email, text messaging, social media, and district apps, to effectively reach different stakeholder groups. Developing a multi-channel communication plan that integrates various platforms is crucial. District 4D's district app and District 3C's multi-channel updates offer practical examples.

Proactive planning and preparedness enable districts to respond swiftly and effectively when a crisis occurs. Superintendents and communication leaders could benefit from developing crisis management protocols and conducting regular training exercises to ensure preparedness. Creating and regularly updating a crisis management plan that includes detailed protocols for different types of crises is essential. District 4D's collaboration with emergency management and District 2B's structured communication plan reflected proactive crisis planning.

A supportive organizational culture fosters trust and collaboration, which are crucial during crises. Practitioners should consider focusing on building a positive organizational culture that values openness, teamwork, and shared purpose. Implementing initiatives that reinforce organizational values, celebrate successes, and promote unity may be beneficial. District 2B's alignment with district values and District 1A's consistent messaging are examples of fostering a supportive culture.

In summary, establishing centralized communication structures, prioritizing transparent and inclusive communication, managing media relations strategically, adopting multi-channel strategies, proactive planning, and cultivating a supportive organizational culture are essential for effective crisis communication and leadership in PK-12 school districts. Incorporating these practices into crisis management strategies can enhance a district's preparedness, responsiveness,

and overall effectiveness in managing crises. These implications, derived from the study's findings, provide a comprehensive guide for educational leaders seeking to improve their crisis management practices.

Implications for Research

The findings of this study offer significant contributions to the field of educational leadership and crisis communication. By applying Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, this research provides theoretical, methodological, and practical insights that can guide future studies and enrich existing literature. The application of Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model to analyze crisis communication in educational settings provides a structured theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of crisis leadership. Demonstrating how each frame influences communication strategy, this study adds depth to crisis communication theory. It shows that a multi-frame approach can yield a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by educational leaders. Future research should continue to apply the Four-Frame Model to different organizational contexts to deepen the understanding of crisis communication. This study serves as a reference point for researchers exploring the interplay between leadership frames and crisis management.

Additionally, the study develops a framework that outlines the key components of crisis leadership, including communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors. This framework provides a practical and theoretical guide for understanding crisis leadership in PK-12 school districts and offers a foundation for comparative analyses across different educational settings. Researchers can use this framework as a baseline for further exploration and refinement. By comparing different school districts and educational contexts, scholars can identify emerging trends and best practices in crisis leadership.

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The cross-case analysis presents a description of how different school districts approach crisis management, revealing both similarities and differences in their strategies. This comparative analysis contributes to the field by highlighting the diverse ways in which the Four-Frame Model can be operationalized in crisis communication. Comparative studies across different geographical and organizational contexts will provide further insights into the applicability of the Four-Frame Model. Future research can build on this comparative approach to identify common patterns and unique strategies.

The study illustrates the importance of using a multi-frame approach to analyze crisis communication and leadership comprehensively. By applying all four frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—this research provides a richer understanding of the complexities involved in crisis management. It reveals how different frames influence superintendents' and communication leaders' approaches to crisis communication and decision-making. Scholars should consider adopting a multi-frame approach in crisis communication research to capture the multi-dimensional nature of leadership behaviors and organizational practices.

The study also reveals the significant role of organizational culture in shaping crisis communication practices and decision-making processes. This finding underscores the importance of aligning communication strategies with organizational values and fostering a supportive culture that prioritizes transparency, teamwork, and stakeholder engagement. Scholars should further investigate the relationship between organizational culture and crisis management outcomes. Understanding how cultural values influence communication strategies can provide deeper insights into effective leadership practices. Future research can build on these findings to

enhance theoretical understanding and improve crisis management practices in educational settings.

Areas for Further Study

While this study provides valuable insights into how superintendents and communication leaders utilize communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors to manage crises in PK-12 school districts, it also opens up several avenues for future research. Addressing these potential research areas can enhance the resilience and effectiveness of school district leaders in handling crises. The research questions guiding this study, such as "*How do superintendents and communication leaders utilize communication structures during crises?*" and "*What decision-making factors are critical in managing school crises?*" highlight the importance of these areas for further investigation.

Crisis communication strategies and structures evolve over time in response to new challenges and crises. Longitudinal studies that track how communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors change over multiple years could provide deeper insights into the factors that drive change and how districts can build resilience in their communication strategies. Such studies should examine how superintendents and communication leaders adapt their approaches to emerging crises, such as health pandemics, technological disruptions, and political controversies.

While qualitative research provides rich insights, quantitative studies can offer empirical generalizability to broader contexts. Developing and validating a quantitative instrument to measure crisis communication effectiveness in educational settings could help identify best practices and key predictors of effective crisis management. Such studies should investigate

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correlations between specific crisis communication strategies and measurable outcomes, such as stakeholder satisfaction, student safety, and district reputation.

Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and social media have transformed crisis communication. Investigating how these technologies influence communication structures and practices in educational settings could provide practical recommendations for districts to integrate new technologies into their crisis communication strategies. Research should focus on analyzing the role of technologies such as chatbots, sentiment analysis, and data visualization in enhancing communication efficiency and stakeholder engagement.

Media relations play a crucial role in shaping public perception during crises. Analyzing the strategies that districts use to manage media relations and their impact on public perception could provide practical guidance on improving media relations and managing public perception effectively. Research should focus on investigating the role of spokespersons, press releases, and media training in influencing how crises are perceived by the public and media outlets.

Organizational culture shapes how leaders and staff perceive and respond to crises. Exploring the relationship between organizational culture and crisis communication outcomes in educational settings could reveal significant insights. Research should identify specific cultural values and norms that positively or negatively influence communication strategies and stakeholder trust. Understanding this relationship could help districts foster a supportive culture that aligns with their crisis management goals.

Rural and urban school districts face distinct challenges in crisis management due to differences in resources, demographics, and infrastructure. Comparing crisis communication strategies and outcomes between rural and urban school districts could inform tailored crisis

management strategies that address the unique needs of both contexts. Such research should examine how resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and technological infrastructure differ between rural and urban districts.

In summary, future research in these areas can build on the findings of this study, providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of crisis management in PK-12 school districts. By exploring these potential avenues, scholars can contribute to the development of more resilient, effective, and adaptive crisis management strategies that benefit educational leaders, staff, students, and communities.

Limitations

The current study provides valuable insights into the crisis communication strategies employed by superintendents and communication leaders in PK-12 school districts. However, like any research endeavor, it is not without limitations. It is important to acknowledge these limitations to understand the scope and applicability of the findings.

First, the study focused on four rural South Carolina school districts, utilizing a qualitative case study approach. While this approach provides rich, context-specific insights, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other PK-12 districts, especially in urban contexts. The small sample size limits the study's external validity, making it challenging to extrapolate the results to broader populations (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015). Future studies should consider including a more diverse range of districts to enhance generalizability.

Second, as the Chief Communications Officer for a school district and a former elementary school principal, I acknowledge my potential biases. Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, my background may have influenced the interpretation of data and analysis. The dual

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role of insider and outsider as both researcher and district administrator presents challenges that can affect neutrality (Buys et al., 2022). While my communications training aimed to minimize bias, the interpretation remains inherently subjective. Addressing these biases requires continuous reflection and acknowledgment of their potential impact.

Third, the study relied on self-reported data through interviews with district leaders. This reliance may have introduced biases, as participants might have provided responses reflecting socially desirable behavior or self-perception rather than actual practices. To mitigate this, strategies like asking for specific examples and corroborating stories were used, but the potential unreliability remains. Incorporating additional data sources such as direct observations and additional document analysis could help triangulate findings and improve reliability.

Lastly, conducting rigorous interviews and ensuring data accuracy required considerable time. Due to these constraints, the number of participants was limited, potentially affecting the study's ability to capture diverse perspectives across the broader field of educational leadership. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and including more diverse educational settings to provide a broader understanding of crisis communication strategies.

To build on the findings of this study, future research should explore a wider range of contexts and employ mixed methods to capture a more comprehensive view of crisis communication. By including both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers can gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of different strategies and identify best practices applicable across various educational settings. This approach would not only enhance the generalizability of the findings but also contribute to the development of more robust and adaptable crisis communication frameworks for PK-12 school districts.

Summary

In conclusion, this dissertation provides a comprehensive understanding of how superintendents and communication leaders in PK-12 school districts manage crises through communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors. The integration of all four of Bolman and Deal's frames across the case studies suggests a comprehensive approach to crisis management, where each frame contributes uniquely to the districts' strategies. The study highlights the need for leaders to be flexible and responsive, drawing on various leadership frames to address different aspects of a crisis. This holistic approach can improve decision-making processes, foster trust and morale among stakeholders, and enhance the overall effectiveness of crisis management in PK-12 school districts.

Each frame not only addresses specific aspects of crisis communication but also complements the others, creating a robust framework for managing crises. The structural and human resource frames provide the foundation for effective operations and stakeholder relations, respectively, while the political and symbolic frames address the broader socio-political dynamics and cultural aspects of crisis management. This method not only aligns with the theoretical framework provided by Bolman and Deal but also illustrates practical applications in real-world settings, offering insights for enhancing crisis management in educational environments. This synthesis is supported by the broader literature, which suggests that integrating multiple perspectives, as advocated by Bolman and Deal, can enhance the efficacy and depth of organizational leadership in crisis situations (Bolman & Deal, 2021). By integrating these insights into their leadership practices, educational leaders can better prepare for and respond to future crises, ensuring the safety and well-being of their students and staff.

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The findings emphasize the importance of centralized communication teams, transparent practices, inclusive decision-making, and strategic management of media relations. These insights contribute to the field of educational leadership and offer practical recommendations for enhancing crisis management strategies in school districts. Future research should continue to explore the complexities of crisis communication and leadership, building upon the theoretical framework and findings presented in this study.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Materials

A-1 Interview Protocol Matrix

| Source | Concept/s | Interview Question |
|--|--|--|
| Bevan (2014) | <p>Background Questions</p> <p>‘...to examine a person’s particular experience a researcher must consider the context and biography from which the experience gains meaning’ (p. 146).</p> | <p>1. Can you describe your role and responsibilities within your school district? Tell me a bit about your personal history as an educational leader up to this point.</p> <p>2. Please share some information about your professional background, particularly in relation to crisis management and communication.</p> |
| <p>Coombs (2023), Elbedour et al. (2020), Heath et al. (2015), Kowalski, (2004), Learned-Miller (2022), Sheninger (2019), Weick (1988)</p> | <p>Crisis Situation and Communication Structures</p> <p>‘...a low probability/high consequence event that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization’ (Weick, 1988, p. 305).</p> <p>The expectation of being a communicator as a district leader now involves engaging stakeholders in political dialogue, sharing visions, creating a positive image, gaining community support for change, and keeping the public informed (Kowalski, 2004; Learned-Miller, 2022).</p> <p>Although most school districts possess crisis management plans (or emergency plans), a much smaller number have crisis communication plans. (Elbedour et al., 2020).</p> | <p>3. Can you describe the communication structures and practices your district employed during a crisis that has occurred during your time in leadership?</p> <p>4. In what ways did your district’s communication approach change or adapt during the crisis?</p> |
| <p>Bolman & Deal (2021), Coombs (2023), Weick (1988), Wooten and James (2008), Pepper et al. (2010)</p> | <p>Decision-Making in Crisis Situations</p> <p>‘...crisis leadership competencies include activities such as decision making, communication, creating organizational capabilities, sustaining an effective organizational culture, managing multiple constituencies, and developing human capital’ (Wooten and James, 2008, p. 354).</p> | <p>5. How do you approach decision-making in a crisis situation?</p> <p>6. How do you assess the effectiveness of your strategies and decisions during a crisis?</p> |

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| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | ‘A school crisis requires immediate decision-making’ (Pepper et al., 2010, p.6) | 7. What are some challenges you face in implementing these strategies? |
| Baran and Alderman (2010), Bolman & Deal (2021), Lopez et al., (2020) | <p>Theoretical Alignment - Structural Frame:</p> <p>This frame focuses on the organization’s formal roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, rules, and procedures. This frame views organizations as machines designed to achieve specific goals efficiently. This frame emphasizes clarity in roles and relationships and seeks to create a well-organized and coordinated structure (Bolman & Deal, 2021).</p> <p>Baran and Alderman (2010) referred to the development and assessment of school crisis plans as the protocol for coordinating and implementing resources when facing catastrophic decision-making events.</p> <p>Lopez et al., (2020) underscored the importance of developing crisis plans that are not only reactive but also proactive in nature.</p> | <p>8. How do you approach the structuring of crisis management plans in your district?</p> <p>9. Can you give an example of how formal policies and procedures were implemented during a recent crisis?</p> |
| Bolman & Deal (2021), Lopez et al., 2020 | <p>Theoretical Alignment - Human Resource Frame:</p> <p>This frame focuses on the people within the organization, their skills, needs, motivations, and relationships. It views organizations as communities where individuals’ well-being, development, and engagement are vital for success. This frame emphasizes open communication, professional growth, and alignment of individual and organizational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2021).</p> <p>Existing research regarding crises in the PK-12 education environment largely focuses on immediate crisis response, with less emphasis on long-term recovery and impact assessment (Lopez et al., 2020)</p> | <p>10. How do you address the needs and concerns of staff, students, and parents during a crisis?</p> <p>11. Could you share a situation where emotional intelligence played a key role in crisis management?</p> |
| Blase & Anderson (1995), Bolman & Deal (2021), Kowalski (2004) | <p>Theoretical Alignment - Political Frame:</p> <p>This frame focuses on power dynamics, interests, conflicts, and alliances within the organization. It views organizations as arenas where different groups compete for resources and influence. This frame emphasizes understanding diverse</p> | 12. How do you navigate power dynamics among groups such as the school board, teachers, and administrators during crises? |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | <p>perspectives, managing conflicts, and navigating political dynamics to achieve organizational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2021).</p> <p>Schools and districts have traditionally been characterized as an isolated culture of teachers and administrators (Blase & Anderson, 1995)</p> <p>The expectation of being a communicator as a district leader now involves engaging stakeholders in political dialogue, sharing visions, creating a positive image, gaining community support for change, and keeping the public informed (Kowalski, 2004).</p> | <p>13. Can you describe a time when managing different interests or conflicts was crucial in a crisis?</p> |
| <p>Bolman & Deal (2021), Fusarelli (2006)</p> | <p>Theoretical Alignment – Symbolic Frame:</p> <p>This frame focuses on the organization’s culture, values, symbols, rituals, and meaning making. It views organizations as theaters where actions and symbols communicate shared beliefs and define reality. This frame emphasizes creating a meaningful narrative and using symbolism to shape perceptions and create a sense of identity (Bolman & Deal, 2021).</p> <p>Effective communication takes the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system and to listen and learn and respond appropriately (Fusarelli, 2006).</p> | <p>14. How do you use symbols or storytelling to convey messages during a crisis?</p> <p>15. Can you provide an example of how culture and values influenced your communication strategy in a past crisis?</p> |

Appendix A-2

Interview Protocol

Introduction:

- Greet the participant and provide a brief overview of the study's purpose.
- Explain the confidentiality of the interview and the use of data solely for research purposes.
- Obtain consent for recording the interview for accurate transcription and analysis.
- I will explain that they will have the opportunity to check my transcripts for accuracy.

Background Questions:

1. Can you describe your role and responsibilities within your school district? Tell me a bit about your personal history as an educational leader up to this point.
2. Please share some information about your professional background, particularly in relation to crisis management and communication.

Crisis Situation

3. Can you describe the communication structures and practices your district employed during a crisis that has occurred during your time in leadership?
 - Probe: *How were these practices developed and who was involved in the decision-making process?*
4. In what ways did your district's communication approach change or adapt during the crisis?
 - Probe: *Were there any particular challenges or successes you can share about this adaptation?*

Decision-Making in Crisis Situations

5. How do you approach decision-making in a crisis situation?
 - Probe: *Can you provide an example where a specific framework or theory guided your decision-making?*
6. How do you assess the effectiveness of your strategies and decisions during a crisis?
 - Probe: *What metrics or feedback mechanisms do you use?*
7. What are some challenges you face in implementing these strategies?
 - Probe: *Can you describe a particular instance where a planned communication strategy did not work as expected? How did you adapt?*

Theoretical Alignment and Practical Application

Structural Frame:

8. How do you approach the structuring of crisis management plans in your district?
 - Probe: *Could you walk me through the specific steps you took in applying these policies during the crisis?*

9. Can you give an example of how formal policies and procedures were implemented during a recent crisis?
- Probe: *What were some of the challenges or unexpected hurdles you encountered while implementing these plans?*

Human Resource Frame:

10. How do you address the needs and concerns of staff, students, and parents during a crisis?
- Probe: *Can you describe how you assessed and responded to the emotional or psychological impact of the crisis on your staff and students?*

11. Could you share a situation where emotional intelligence played a key role in crisis management?
- Probe: *What specific emotional cues did you observe and respond to during this situation, and how did these influence your decision-making?*

Political Frame:

12. How do you navigate power dynamics among groups such as the school board, teachers, and administrators during crises?
- Probe: *Can you give an example of a compromise or negotiation you had to facilitate during this crisis?*

13. Can you describe a time when managing different interests or conflicts was crucial in a crisis?
- Probe: *How did you balance competing interests, and what strategies did you use to reach a consensus or decision?*

Symbolic Frame:

14. How do you use symbols or storytelling to convey messages during a crisis?
- Probe: *How did these symbolic actions resonate with your staff and the community? Did you receive any feedback?*

15. Can you provide an example of how culture and values influenced your communication strategy in a past crisis?
- Probe: *Can you provide an instance where the district's core values significantly guided your communication strategy?*

Conclusion

16. Is there anything else about your experience with crisis management and communication that you think is important to share?

Thank the participant for their time and contribution.

Explain the next steps and how the findings will be used.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Informed Consent to the Superintendent and Communication Leader

Information about Being in a Research Study

Clemson University

Navigating Crises in Education: A Study of Communication Structures, Practices, and Decision-making Factors in PK-12 Public School Districts

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Dr. Hans Klar is inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University. Darian Byrd is a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. You are being invited to participate in the study because you play a key role in communication during crises in your school district.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors used by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations. By examining the experiences of various district leaders across South Carolina who have successfully managed crises, our goal is to gain valuable insights and strategies that can aid other educational leaders in effectively handling similar challenges in the future.

Voluntary Consent

You are not required to participate in this study as a condition of your employment. Your participation is voluntary, and should you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time. Any information that is shared as part of this research will not impact your continued employment, any assessment, or employee performance evaluation. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Activities and Procedures

Your part of the study would be to participate in an interview focused on your experiences and strategies related to crisis management and communication. The interview will explore how you, as a district leader, navigate the complexities of communicating and making decisions during crisis situations. We are particularly interested in understanding the specific structures and practices you utilize, as well as the key factors that guide your decision-making process during such critical times. The interview can be conducted either in person, over the phone, or via a video conference platform such as Zoom or Webex and will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. Audio recordings will not be shared publicly and will be deleted after transcription. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study.

Participation Time

If you agree to participate, it will take up to one hour to complete the interview and share any relevant documents.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

Though there are no direct benefits for you, your participation in this study will advance knowledge on effective crisis communication strategies within PK-12 public school districts, enhance crisis management practices, and contribute to the development of policies and training programs aimed at improving educational leadership during crises.

PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations. Potentially identifiable data will be collected during this study. However, every effort will be made to protect your identity and the identity of any school district. The following procedures will be used to maintain data confidentially. When participants give consent to be a part of the study, each will be assigned an alphanumeric code to protect their identity. This code will be associated with all participant data that is collected. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting the findings of the study.

Data that is collected will be de-identified and stored on password-protected and secure cloud storage belonging to Mr. Byrd. De-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional consent from the participants or legally authorized representative.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Hans Klar at Clemson University at hklar@clemson.edu. You may also contact Darian Byrd at 864-313-5651 or dbyrd@clemson.edu with any further questions concerning this study.

CONSENT

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By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, are at least 18 years of age, been allowed to ask any questions, and are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Recruitment Email to the Superintendent and Communication Leader

Dear [Superintendent/Communications Leader],

Dr. Hans Klar and I are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the communication structures, practices, and decision-making factors used by superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts during crisis situations. By examining the experiences of various district leaders across South Carolina who have successfully managed crises, our goal is to gain valuable insights and strategies that can aid other educational leaders in effectively handling similar challenges in the future.

Your part of the study would be to participate in an interview focused on your experiences and strategies related to crisis management and communication. The interview will explore how you, as a district leader, navigate the complexities of communicating and making decisions during crisis situations. We are particularly interested in understanding the specific structures and practices you utilize, as well as the key factors that guide your decision-making process during such critical times. The interview can be conducted either in person, over the phone, or via a video conference platform such as Zoom or Webex and will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study.

I have attached a letter with more information about the study. If you agree to participate, the interview will take up to one hour to complete.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know when a convenient time for me to call you would be.

I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Darian L. Byrd

Appendix D: Codebook

Codes

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|------------------------------------|--|-------|------------|
| Background | Describes the foundational context and background of superintendents and communication leaders in relation to their professional environment and roles. | 5 | 34 |
| Experience in Crisis Management | This code identifies the previous experiences that superintendents and communication leaders have had in managing crises. | 4 | 13 |
| Experience with Communication | Examines the communication experiences of superintendents and communication leaders and how they contribute to crisis communication strategies. | 3 | 7 |
| Role and Responsibilities | Focuses on the specific roles and responsibilities of superintendents and communication leaders in the context of crisis management. | 5 | 8 |
| Crisis Communication Practices | This addressed the research question - How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication practices to manage real or perceived crises within the educational environment? | 5 | 50 |
| Being aware of situations | Highlights the importance of being aware of potential or unfolding crisis situations to ensure an effective response. | 3 | 7 |
| Crisis Communication Plan | Describes the structured plans and protocols that superintendents and communication leaders follow during crises. | 4 | 7 |
| Importance of Consistent Messaging | Emphasizes the need for consistent messaging to maintain stakeholder trust and prevent misinformation. | 3 | 7 |

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| Name | Description | Files | References |
|--|---|-------|------------|
| Timeliness of Communication | Examines the importance of delivering timely communication during crises to minimize confusion and reassure stakeholders. | 5 | 15 |
| Parents want to know immediately | Highlights the urgency of providing information to parents quickly during a crisis. | 5 | 10 |
| Social Media | Describes the role of social media in crisis communication, including its advantages and challenges. | 5 | 11 |
| Crisis Communication Structures | This section answers the Research Question - How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication structures? | 5 | 78 |
| Adaptation in Communication | A shift in handling communication in response to changing crisis situations. | 5 | 19 |
| Responsiveness to Crises | Focuses on how superintendents and communication leaders quickly respond to crises. | 4 | 10 |
| Direct Access to Supt. | Describes the ability of school leaders to have direct access to the superintendent during crises. | 2 | 3 |
| Implementation of Crisis Management Plans | Examines the effectiveness of implementing crisis management plans | 4 | 11 |
| Law Enforcement Support | Describes the role of law enforcement agencies in supporting crisis management efforts. | 4 | 9 |
| Policies and procedures during a crisis | Outlines the policies and procedures that superintendents and communication leaders follow during crises. | 4 | 16 |
| Preparation for a Crisis - Planning & Professional Development | Focuses on the importance of planning and professional development in preparing for crises. | 1 | 5 |

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| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|-------|------------|
| Role of Communication Leader | Describes the role of the communication leader in managing crisis communication strategies. | 4 | 15 |
| Relationship with Media | Highlights the relationship between superintendents/communication leaders and the media during crises. | 2 | 3 |
| Size of district | Examines the impact of district size on crisis communication strategies and structures. | 3 | 7 |
| Rurality | Describes the unique challenges faced by rural districts in crisis communication. | 2 | 4 |
| Utilization of Communication Tools | Examines how superintendents and communication leaders utilize various communication tools during crises. | 2 | 10 |
| Decision-Making Factors in Crises | This section answers the Research Question - How do superintendents and communications leaders in PK-12 public school districts utilize communication decision-making factors to manage crises? | 5 | 154 |
| Alignment with Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model | This section deals with the Research Question - In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model? | 5 | 53 |
| Human Resources Frame | This section deals with the Human Resources Frame - In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model? | 5 | 25 |
| Addressing Needs and Concerns During a Crisis | Highlights the importance of addressing the needs and concerns of stakeholders during crises. | 4 | 21 |

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| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|-------|------------|
| Addressing Staff needs | Describes the specific strategies used to address staff needs during crises. | 3 | 9 |
| Sympathy for districts that have experienced a crisis | Expresses the empathy superintendents and communication leaders have for other districts that have faced crises. | 1 | 1 |
| Political Frame | This section deals with the Political Frame - In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model? | 4 | 4 |
| Navigating Power Dynamics | Examines the power dynamics that superintendents and communication leaders must navigate during crises. | 4 | 4 |
| Board Member dynamics | Highlights the impact of board member dynamics on crisis communication strategies. | 5 | 16 |
| External Groups | Describes the influence of external groups, such as community organizations, on crisis communication. | 1 | 1 |
| Managing Conflicting Interests | Examines how superintendents and communication leaders manage conflicting interests during crises. | 4 | 8 |
| Political Influences | Describes the political influences that affect crisis communication strategies and decision-making. | 2 | 4 |
| School level dynamics | Examines the dynamics between school-level administrators and district leaders during crises. | 4 | 6 |
| Structural Frame | This section deals with the Structural Frame - In what ways do the decision-making factors | 2 | 5 |

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| Name | Description | Files | References |
|--|--|-------|------------|
| | during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model? | | |
| Teamwork in Daily Operations and Crisis Situations | Highlights the importance of teamwork in daily operations and during crisis situations. | 2 | 4 |
| Symbolic Frame | This section deals with the Symbolic Frame - In what ways do the decision-making factors during crises align with or diverge from the theoretical frameworks, particularly Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model? | 5 | 19 |
| Symbolic Communication | Examines the use of symbolic communication in reinforcing organizational culture and values during crises. | 5 | 17 |
| Approach to Decision-Making | Describes the overall approach to decision-making adopted by superintendents and communication leaders during crises. | 4 | 24 |
| Communication is situational | Highlights that communication strategies should be adapted to the specific crisis situation. | 5 | 7 |
| Emotional Intelligence | Focuses on the role of emotional intelligence in effective crisis communication and leadership. | 2 | 6 |
| Importance of Communication | Emphasizes the critical importance of communication in managing crises. | 1 | 3 |
| Staying calm & non-emotional | Describes the importance of remaining calm and non-emotional during crises. | 2 | 8 |
| Assessing Effectiveness | Examines how superintendents and communication leaders assess the effectiveness of their crisis communication strategies. | 5 | 14 |

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| Name | Description | Files | References |
|------------------------------------|--|-------|------------|
| Challenges in Crisis Communication | This theme addresses what challenges do Superintendent's face in implementing crisis communications strategies | 5 | 31 |
| Challenges in Implementation | Describes the challenges faced in implementing crisis communication plans. | 3 | 6 |
| COVID Communication | Examines how superintendents and communication leaders managed communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. | 3 | 8 |
| Misinformation | Highlights the challenges posed by misinformation during crises. | 2 | 3 |
| Overcommunication | Describes the potential challenges of overcommunication during crises. | 2 | 5 |
| Collaborative Decision-Making | Highlights the importance of collaborative decision-making during crises. | 4 | 11 |
| Use of Advisors | Describes the role of advisors in supporting crisis communication and decision-making. | 4 | 11 |
| Definition of a crisis | Examines how superintendents and communication leaders define what constitutes a crisis. | 2 | 3 |
| Empowering Feedback | Focuses on the role of empowering feedback in improving crisis communication strategies. | 3 | 5 |
| Safety First decision-making | Describes how superintendents and communication leaders prioritize safety in their decision-making processes. | 3 | 4 |

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