Chapter 7

Getting Back to a "New Normal":
Grief Leadership After a Fatal School Shooting

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ABSTRACT

Violence in educational institutions compounds and accumulates in our collective memory, as school shootings have become a ubiquitous phenomenon. When a young man carrying three guns entered Dawson College in Montréal, the downtown core came to a standstill. As bullets sprayed and ricocheted, one young woman was killed, 19 others wounded, and a community of 10,000 students, teachers, and staff were traumatized. This research employed a qualitative methodology, interviewing 10 senior administrators and managers in-depth. Findings document the salient role grief leadership played in restoring balance and an educational focus in the wake of a shooting on campus and served to reshape the community into one of learning, resilience, and courage. It details specific actions taken by administrators, which promoted healing and re-established equilibrium at a site of grief, loss, and terror. Administrative responses proved essential in helping to re-establish thriving at Dawson College.

INTRODUCTION

Dawson College is an English-language CEGEP[1] in the heart of downtown Montréal. Located in an historic former convent, it has a diverse multi-ethnic student population. On 13 September 2006, a 25-year-old man,[2] entered the College around lunchtime carrying three guns. As bullets sprayed and ricocheted in the school's atrium, student Anastasia DeSousa was killed, 19 other people were wounded and a community of 10,000 teachers, students and staff were terrorized and traumatized. Seven months later, a male student killed 32 people, himself, and wounded many more at Virginia Tech. School shootings are not just a North American phenomenon; an 18-year-old male student shot and killed seven classmates and the female principal, injuring at least 10 others in Finland. Campus shootings can enmesh faculty and students as targets and perpetrators. A professor denied tenure fatally shot three of her colleagues and wounded three others at a faculty meeting in 2010.

BACKGROUND

Far from being an unusual occurrence, school shootings are becoming more prominent (see Reilly, 2020). Casualties are not limited to those who are killed or injured; entire communities composed of students, staff, and faculty, as well as their families and friends, are impacted by these traumatic events. Research (Connolly, 2004; Reilly & D'Amico, 2002) suggests that individuals may not necessarily bounce back from traumatic events but could be at risk for decreased functioning in psychological, educational, and socio-emotional areas (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Hilarski, 2004). Generally, the literature focuses on mental health strategies to help students, staff, and faculty to individually heal from trauma. There is little evidence in how a school, as a whole system, can regain a liveable balance and an educational focus after a fatal shooting and the salient role that school administrators can play.

Fein (2001) and Fein and Isaacson (2009) found that school leaders were deeply affected by school shootings, both emotionally and physically. They coped by drawing on their training and past experiences; finding sustenance in their spiritual beliefs and positive self-talk; focusing on tasks; collaborating, establishing and maintaining boundaries; using humour; sharing their experiences; leaving the district in which the shooting occurred; and performing symbolic acts. Most described engaging in emotion work, i.e. conscious attempts to evoke or suppress specific feelings in relation to the social context in which they found themselves (Hochschild, 1990). They would consciously cover up some "inappropriate" feelings (fear) or feign inauthentic feelings (decisiveness) to comply with role expectations (surface acting). They often described this as putting on their game face. In contrast to adopting a façade,

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