

Leading through wildfires: a typology of communication during crisis events

Adele Nye and Jennifer Charteris
University of New England, Armidale, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – Natural disasters are increasing in frequency and severity, intensifying the communication demands placed on school leaders. This article examines how Australian school leaders communicated during catastrophic wildfire events, with attention to how communication supported trust, ensured safety, and fostered operational continuity.

Design/methodology/approach – An interpretivist collective case study was conducted with six school leaders in New South Wales, Australia. Data comprised open ended interviews, supplemented by relevant school/system documents and social media captures. Interviews were professionally transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with iterative, inductive coding and analytic dialogue between researchers.

Findings – Leaders mobilised a set of crisis-communication practices spanning immediate threat response and longer-term recovery. These included emotionally attuned communication; rapid, adaptive multi-channel messaging; values-based care; ethical advocacy and boundary-setting; risk-informed proactive decisions; coordinated engagement of frontline staff; receptive listening to lived experience; trust-building transparency; decisive messaging under uncertainty; and equitable communication oriented to the collective rather than the most vocal.

Research limitations/implications – Findings are based on a small group of participants in one Australian state with retrospective accounts of crises. Transferability to other crisis types and systems warrant further research.

Practical implications – The typology and reflective questions provide a practical framework for preparedness planning, distributed communication roles, and equity-oriented stakeholder engagement.

Social implications – Strengthening crisis communication capacity can support community trust, safety and resilience as climate-related disasters increasingly disrupt schooling.

Originality/value – The study contributes a typology of crisis communication grounded in leaders' wildfire experiences and offers a reflective self-assessment tool for leadership preparation and team learning. It extends crisis-leadership scholarship by specifying communication as a situated, relational practice that underpins trust, safety and continuity in high-stakes contexts.

Keywords Crisis, Communication, School leadership

Paper type Research article

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Introduction

Worldwide, there has been an increase in severe fire and flood events linked with climate change. The impact on global ecosystems and “the fabric of life as we know it” (Ben Zvi Assaraf *et al.*, 2025, p. 191) has been described by the United Nations (2021, online) as a “code red” assessment for humanity. In Australia, school communities and their surrounding landscapes have been ravaged by fire and flood. These events are becoming more common and critical events that impact schools are only likely to increase (Bolan *et al.*, 2025; Keenan-Jones *et al.*, 2025). This is not a problem associated only with the Australian continent, rather it is a global concern. This article shares findings from research premised on a theoretical framework drawn from both leadership and school crisis literature.

This research examines how school leaders communicate effectively during natural disaster crises, with a focus on identifying the strategies and values that underpin responsive communication. Despite extensive work on crisis leadership (Kreamer *et al.*, 2025; Lehtonen *et al.*, 2025) empirical research on leaders' crisis-communication practices during catastrophic



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wildfires remains limited. The study therefore delineates from the pandemic dominant crisis literature and is guided by two research questions: What crisis communication practices do school leaders enact during catastrophic wildfire events? How do the identified practices function to build trust, support safety, and sustain operational continuity?

Scholars suggest that an alternative approach to leadership is required during crises (Schechter *et al.*, 2022; Striepe and Cunningham, 2021; Drysdale and Gurr, 2017; Mutch, 2015; Smith and Riley, 2012). School leaders are forced to very abruptly deal with catastrophic events which require very specific crisis leadership skills, tools, strategies, and practices. This study is informed by scholarship on crisis leadership (Akbaba Altun, 2025; Bellibaş and Karaferye, 2025; Striepe and Cunningham, 2021), relational leadership (Eacott, 2016), and communication as social practice (Wang, 2022). Crisis leadership research identifies three interrelated dimensions as particularly salient in schooling contexts: (1) safeguarding physical and psychological safety (Alon and Schechter, 2025); (2) sustaining organisational continuity under uncertainty (Peltola *et al.*, 2024); and (3) maintaining relational trust and collaboration within complex stakeholder networks (Brown and Jones, 2025; Schechter *et al.*, 2022). Communication mediates each of these dimensions. It is through communication that leaders interpret risk, coordinate action, distribute authority, and enact care.

Natural disasters constitute a distinct category of crisis. Unlike reputational or organisational crises, wildfire events involve rapidly shifting environmental conditions, infrastructure disruption, and direct threats to life (Bolan *et al.*, 2025). These conditions intensify the temporal pressures of leadership decision-making and amplify the ethical stakes of communication. While the COVID-19 pandemic generated a substantial body of research on crisis leadership in schools (Striepe and Kafa, 2025; Lien *et al.*, 2023), fewer empirical studies examine school leadership during catastrophic natural disasters in high-risk environmental contexts (Rørstad Welle and Gunnulfsen, 2025).

This research focuses on communication as a situated leadership practice enacted under conditions of acute environmental threat. Specifically, the research maps extant literature on communication during crises alongside data from a qualitative case study that features the communication of school leaders who have experienced catastrophic wildfires. When a major fire affects a school, the impact can be felt for years to come and how school communities rebuild depends on strong leadership (Nye, 2016). It is therefore timely to consider this elemental aspect of leadership, given the prevalence of unanticipated crisis events across the globe that affect communities and specifically schools (Ben Zvi Assaraf *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, this is an opportunity to reflect on the complex dynamics within school communities and the interdependent nature of crisis leadership and communication (Striepe and Kafa, 2025).

Trust and the relational dynamics of communication in schools

Leaders are never sole operators. They are always part of a community or an eco-system (Hudson and Gurr, 2025; Diaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2021). In a systems approach the community comprises of a “constellation of actors” (Diaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2021, p. 439) where the opportunity for co-producing a sense of vitality is enacted. Contextual features are always essential considerations for leading through crises, as school communities are complex relational environments. Leaders are enmeshed in a range of relationships and social constellations where trust is an important feature (Da’as *et al.*, 2025; Ramshaw, 2025; Castelnuovo *et al.*, 2023; Sezer and Uzon, 2023; Kosonen and Ikonen, 2022; Schechter *et al.*, 2022; Wilson and Cunliffe, 2022; Lawson *et al.*, 2017).

Trust is increasingly recognised as a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of communication and leadership within schools, influencing both relationships and organisational effectiveness. Lawson *et al.* (2017) argue that when researchers are assessing the effectiveness of communication three lenses can be applied: the communication forms, content and existing social relations (p. 40). Importantly, “relational trust” and “reciprocal trust” need to be

developed within the school (Lawson *et al.*, 2017, p. 46). Likewise, Döös and Wilhelmson (2024) found that the value of mutual respect, responsibility and trust were key to success in their study of co-principal teams. In highlighting the emergent quality of trust in schools, Wilson and Cunliffe (2022) acknowledge how “relationship quality, trust, and trusting behaviours are not outcomes, but interrelated constituents of an iterative and emergent process of relationship development on the part of both leaders and staff” (p. 362). Research has shown that teachers believe that not enough time is given to communication practices in schools (Higham *et al.*, 2025; Schad, 2019; Chen-Levi, 2019; Parker, 2017).

Despite widespread agreement on the critical role of communication in schools (Striepe and Kafa, 2025), both research and practice reveal ongoing challenges in prioritising, resourcing, and enacting responsive communication strategies. Researchers agree that smooth communication in schools is essential for day-to-day functioning but that there is a “knowledge and theory gap” in research (De Nobile, 2021). Communication practices need to be seen as authentic and genuine (Klein, 2017) and leaders must “convert the talk to walk” (Bendikson, 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, schools need to be well resourced with up-to-date communication tools (Waite and Garcia-Carmona, 2025).

Crisis communication as multi-channel, mediated practice

During crises, schools often operate amid disrupted infrastructure and intensified misinformation, requiring leaders to communicate across multiple channels, audiences and time horizons. The importance of school leaders’ communication during crisis events cannot be overstated. Communication during crises has to be responsive as it is key in navigating the events and their aftermath. Responsive communication is foundational for protecting lives, maintaining a school’s reputation, and mitigating any negative repercussions associated with crises (Coombs, 2019). When usual avenues are not possible due to disruption in traditional lines of communication, alternatives need to be found. There can be the use of supplemental communication tools, such as phone tree systems, text messages, word-of-mouth, posted signs, messages to local authorities, and daily announcements through local media (Bishop *et al.*, 2015). School leaders broker external messages, make interim arrangements with partner agencies (for instance, finding premises after a catastrophic school fire) and mediate information for teachers, school students, and their families during crises (Hulme *et al.*, 2021).

Social media can be used to counteract false information, address confusion and ensure appropriate support is mobilised for the school community (Rehm *et al.*, 2021). Crisis communication increasingly relies on digital platforms, including SMS systems, social media, email newsletters, and learning management systems (Alanezi, 2021; Ewing and Cooper, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication emerged as central to sustaining school/community connectivity under physical separation (Lien *et al.*, 2023; Peltola *et al.*, 2024). Multi-channel communication enhances message reach, mitigates misinformation, and strengthens perceived transparency (Shahbazi and Bunker, 2024). However, digital communication also introduces equity concerns, as access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy varies across communities. These considerations are especially salient in geographically dispersed, rural contexts affected by natural disasters, like those in Australia.

The importance of responsive communication in crises

Responsive leaders provide clear and transparent information during crises (Adams *et al.*, 2023; Lien *et al.*, 2023). Reliable information about the crisis situation, protocols, and information about regulations are needed, as well as responsive adjustments and adaptations required as information is supplied by the government, local authorities, and Departments of Education (Lien *et al.*, 2023). Although traditional means of communication may be obstructed during a crisis, finding a means for rapid and accurate communication can mitigate

material losses and foster trust between school leaders and those adversely affected (Alanezi, 2021).

Research indicates that effective leaders provide clear and transparent information during crises (Adams *et al.*, 2023; Lien *et al.*, 2023) and there is capacity for coherent coordination and connectivity (Hayes and Derrington, 2023). Reliable information about the crisis situation, protocols, and information about regulations are needed, as well as responsive adjustments and adaptations required as information is supplied by the government, local authorities, and Departments of Education (Lien *et al.*, 2023). Although traditional means of communication may be obstructed during a crisis, finding a means for rapid and accurate communication can mitigate material losses and foster trust between school leaders and those adversely affected (Alanezi, 2021).

School leaders filter messages from mainstream news outlets and social media to reassure teachers and parents (Hulme *et al.*, 2021) and, in turn, they are responsible for brokering information to the community and public. This requires expertise in working with the media. Moreover, communication is an important element in the recuperation process as leaders deal with communities in trauma and shock (Akbaba Altun, 2025). There is a particular need for flexibility. The literature indicates that school leaders around the world encounter uncertainty and the unexpected in times of crisis (Hulme *et al.*, 2021). As an example, a teacher in Ireland from Hulme *et al.*'s study (2021) noted: "We are constantly reinventing how school can run the next week" (p.171). With such high levels of uncertainty during crisis periods, school leaders need to be agile and responsive (Venesser *et al.*, 2023). This is especially important as leaders play a central role in safeguarding their communities from trauma and adversity during crisis events (Mutch, 2015). They therefore need to make assessments and act, which requires expertise in communication.

Method

The research was designed to provide a snapshot of the experiences of six school leaders who led their schools through catastrophic wildfire events. This study employed an interpretivist case study design (Creswell and Poth, 2018) to explore leadership communication practices across multiple school sites affected by catastrophic wildfires in New South Wales, Australia. Ethical clearance was received from the University of New England (Approval HE20-037) and the school leaders received information letters explaining the study, requesting consent for voluntary involvement and assuring confidentiality.

The participants

Six school principals were purposively selected for the research based on direct leadership experience during catastrophic wildfire events. Relevant selection criteria included: (a) principalship during the crisis event; (b) direct community impact (evacuation, property loss, or school closure); and (c) willingness to participate in reflective interviews. The interviews were 60–90 min in length and were audio recorded and professionally transcribed to ensure accuracy and facilitate in-depth analysis. The interviews were open ended, allowing school leaders to narrate their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In addition to the interviews, data collection consisted of the examination of documents relating to the fires and social media captures. Photographs were also provided by the school leaders of the devastation and the key initiatives developed during the recuperation phase. It became apparent during the interviews that communication was an important feature of leadership during the wildfire crises.

Data coding

Data from three interviews are presented in depth in this article because they provided the most comprehensive illustrations of the typology dimensions. However, all six interviews informed

coding and theme development. Transcripts were independently coded by the two researchers using an inductive process to identify significant themes and patterns within the data. The researchers used colour coding to identify codes (Williams and Moser, 2019). The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2017) reflexive thematic analysis. Codes were compared and iteratively refined through analytic dialogue. This dialogue between the researchers supported analytic rigour, with the collaboration located in a constructivist paradigm (Coulston et al., 2025).

Initial codes were generated, reviewed, and grouped into broader thematic categories, which were then discussed between the researchers to reach consensus and enhance trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were examined in relation to the research questions concerning trust-building, safety, and operational continuity. A typology was developed through abstraction from the researchers' comparison of patterns. Trustworthiness was strengthened through independent coding and the comparison of summary interpretations. The participant pseudonyms and school profiles are as follows:

Peter- Leader of a small coastal primary school with a population of 114 students in a growing coastal town. The town and community were significantly impacted by wildfires with many homes lost.

Barry- Leader of a small rural school with 41 students and located in a remote geographical area close to the state border. The community was impacted by large wildfires in the remote countryside and their suffering was amplified by pre-existing severe drought conditions.

John: Leader of a suburban independent faith-based school in a regional town with 112 students ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12. The community was significantly impacted by wildfires with many homes lost.

Quotations from the dataset are used to develop and illustrate a typology of communication that is intended to inform leadership approaches during crises.

Findings

The findings provide a set of interrelated communication practices that leaders can enact under conditions of acute environmental threat, and analyse how these practices function to support trust, safety, and continuity within school communities. The following section is structured according to the two research questions guiding the study: (1) What crisis communication practices do school leaders enact during catastrophic wildfire events? and (2) How do these practices function to build trust, support safety, and sustain operational continuity? The analysis is organised into two interrelated dimensions. Firstly, a set of empirically grounded communication practices enacted by leaders during crisis conditions are identified. Secondly, we examine how these practices operate to produce relational, organisational, and safety-oriented outcomes within school communities.

Crisis communication practices enacted by school leaders during wildfire events

From communicating to ensure the physical needs of their communities are met, to recruiting and briefing stakeholders, leaders work with others to make critical decisions under pressure. Their approaches underscore a nuanced appreciation of the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between professional obligations and personal empathy. Whether through providing practical support, such as washing facilities during droughts, or protecting staff welfare against unreasonable demands, the leaders in the study draw on a spectrum of communication strategies that are responsive, value-driven, and decisively empathetic.

Their stories, from managing resources during wildfires to engaging in proactive and equitable dialogue with all stakeholders, illustrate a typology of communication characteristics essential for navigating the turbulence of crisis leadership in education settings.

Communicating with emotional intelligence. During crises there is a need to understand the balance between educators' professional and personal responsibilities: There is a need to

navigate the complex dynamics of ensuring staff well-being while maintaining focus on student and family needs. Barry's comment highlights his emotional intelligence, as he understood that he was not in the precarious position that the staff and community were in.

I had a very difficult job in telling the staff that they needed to also stay home and protect their own livelihoods and lives, when they were very focused on the children, and the families. So, that was a big challenge for me because I could walk away at any stage because I live in teacher housing, so it's not my house. (Barry – rural primary school principal)

Responsive communication. A community in long-term drought and without water is a dangerous fact of life in many Australian regions. In addition to dealing with the impact of fires, Barry's responsive communication led to a practical way to support his community. He opened the school to provide a service. The simple provision of a means to wash one's clothes has an enormous impact on a sense of well-being and the community's capacity to live in difficult circumstances.

So, this little girl said, "I haven't had washed clothes for six weeks." That's when I started the process of building up these facilities for the community. The neighbouring towns got 1,500 people in it and there's only one [working] washing machine and people are running out of the water across the entire district. I just got two really good quality washing machines in my disabled bathroom and parents just come and do their washing there. (Barry – rural primary school principal)

Responding to specific community needs, like the lack of washing facilities, demonstrates sensitive and responsive communication and leadership. It involves listening to the community and taking practical and perceptive actions to address their needs.

Communicating values. A school is often the hub of a community and as such there is a duty of care that extends beyond what schools would normally be expected to do. Actions communicate values and John highlights the importance of communicating care by addressing the most basic needs, assisting to ensure families had meals. These leadership actions communicate that the school understood the trauma and sought to provide support and stability to the children, ensuring that their physical needs were met during the crisis.

And one of the things that we did do was we provided 27 families with meals and hampers. It was pretty humble type of stuff and it was more probably a gesture. (John -regional independent school)

Projecting calm with solutions to support the community enables them to have faith in their ability to overcome the crisis (Potter *et al.*, 2021).

Ethical communication. Barry's leader role also involved ethical decision-making and communicating assertively with higher authorities to protect the well-being of the staff. This shows how leaders have to balance external demands with the internal capacity and needs of their team. Communicating ethically was important for Barry. Seeing his staff were exhausted, Barry spoke about having to push back against the Department's demands that seemed unreasonable. The well-being of the staff was at the forefront of Barry's mind.

So, in terms of my leadership, I'm a bit more aggressive upwards now to other people above me who try and impose things upon us. So, I push back because I can see that my staff are exhausted. As a leader I really am very protective of them and I say no, I will not be doing that. (Barry – rural primary school principal)

Risk prediction and proactive decision-making. All leaders in the study anticipated and responded to threats and ascertained risk. They needed to make and communicate timely decisions to safeguard the school community. This required proactive decision-making based on risk assessment. Decision-making in the moment was crucial. Like many of the participants, Peter spoke about the need to make considered decisions. Facing unpredictable fires and imminent danger, school leaders need to be able to make judgments and act. They

need to trust contextual knowledge. Peter described the early closure of the school retrospectively as the correct thing to do. He had to work with his director and predict what to do ahead of time. Peter liaised with his director to make the decision to close the school in anticipation of worsening conditions which illustrates proactive leadership. Effective communication about such decisions, based on risk assessment, is crucial in ensuring safety and preparedness.

My director and I were talking and there was the threat of the fire had sort of progressed from that afternoon lunchtime. It was getting worse and worse, and we spoke about it, and he said, "I think it's in the best interest to make the school not operational for the Thursday." So, on that Thursday we made that decision and in hindsight that was the best decision that we had ever made (Peter - principal regional primary school)

Engaging frontline staff. Clear and effective messaging and communication to media and staff is an imperative during a crisis. Leaders are typically well placed and experienced to furnish clear and transparent information (Lien *et al.*, 2023). There is the need to provide coherent and reliable information about the crisis situation, rules, and regulations, as well as adjusting and adapting the information supplied by the government, local authorities or Department of Education (Lien *et al.*, 2023). It is helpful for previously developed communication strategies to be in place with distributed roles for the different staff. As Peter's comment highlights, engaging office staff in strategic planning emphasises the importance of having a coordinated and multi-channel communication approach. This ensures that information reaches all stakeholders in a timely and effective manner.

The office staff were involved in a lot of coordination because they're the frontline with communication platforms. They were heavily involved with the executive in strategically planning a response and managing that. A lot of good came out of that. We saw further opportunities in a variety of communication platforms. We have SMS messages that go out to every family phone. They get it, regardless of if they're on social media or not. So, they know in an instant (Peter -principal regional primary school)

Receptive communication. Communicating receptively involves using active listening and making space so all stakeholders can express needs and concerns. This involves being open to hearing people's stories during and after the event. John talks about being open to learning from others and valuing informal forms of communication so that the lived experience can inform practice.

You need a sense of direction, but you need to be very open to benefiting from the experience of others. Some people who have lived experience may never have been able to share what they know through the formal structures. (John -regional independent school)

Communicating to build trust. The successful management of adversity with balanced decision-making that prioritises safety can strengthen trust in the school community. Building trust with the teachers and school community is a critical aspect of effective communication during crises (Lien *et al.*, 2023; Mutch, 2015). If leaders are open and honest, people are more likely to trust them, even if the news is not good. Trust can break down if there is any sense that information is being withheld (Sutherland, 2017). Building trust with families and stakeholders was important for participants in the study. Peter talks about how his actions during adversity built trust with his community.

Adversity, if handled well, can further bond and strengthen the connection you've had with the community . . . The parents thought the leadership was very proactive . . . I think that strengthened [trust]. As you know relationships and respect take years to build up and that did help cement that with the community. (Peter -principal regional primary school)

Ensuring transparency in communicating decisions, through mediums such as social media, can play a key role in developing and maintaining trust.

Decisive communication. Decisive communication is crucial in times of crisis. Decisions may need to be made to close the school to ensure safety for the school community and so there is a need to assess evolving circumstances and respond quickly. There is also value in planning a measured response even when critical decisions are to be communicated under time pressure. The decision to close a school, influenced by emergency services advice, reflects decisive communication. John's quotation illustrates how conveying such decisions clearly, especially when they significantly impact so many people, is vital.

We've got our school board and we make the decisions at that level, but I was being encouraged by the emergency services in those bushfires to consider that we wouldn't want buses unnecessarily on the road. And so, on account of that, I decided to close the school. And that's something that was quite dramatic because our school has rarely ever shut. (John -regional independent school)

Equitable communication. Managing school community concerns and balancing various stakeholder needs are key actions for leaders. According to [Potter et al. \(2021\)](#), engagement with parent and community voice is foundational. Listening to their concerns and delivering on their needs, where possible, builds trust, enables a dialogue, and creates a sense of collaboration during a crisis. However, with a community in distress, it is advisable to ensure clear protocols govern how concerns are received, triaged, and responded to. The concern is that communication can be dominated by the loudest voices. An inclusive approach considers the needs of the entire community and not just a vocal few. John signals how communication should be managed judiciously, in a way that considers the needs and concerns of all members.

Of course, to remain calm under pressure and not just let the mob or the loudest voice dominate and be quite measured – but be fairly quick to respond. I've talked about patience but some of these things do need quick responses. It's just not all about one person, it's about the group. (John -regional independent school)

Where relevant and feasible, it may be possible to invite contributions from the broader community to inform decision-making. Community and wider stakeholder meetings can be scheduled to share leadership decisions, and to communicate why decisions are made ([Sutherland, 2017](#)). Where possible and appropriate, the community can contribute to decision-making so as to avoid the risk of backlash where solutions are not seen to be relevant to their needs.

How communication practices build trust, support safety, and sustain operational continuity

The identified communication practices do not operate in isolation. Moreover, they function relationally to produce outcomes associated with trust, safety, and organisational continuity. Trust is strengthened through transparency, consistency, and visible care in leader communication. Safety is supported through timely, risk-informed messaging and proactive decision-making that prioritises the physical and psychological wellbeing of the school community. Operational continuity is sustained through coordinated, multi-channel communication that enables role clarity, adaptive responses, and the maintenance of key organisational functions under conditions of disruption. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and highlight the centrality of communication as a mediating practice in crisis leadership.

A typology of communication for leading through crises. Leadership is not an objective entity but rather a social construction. It therefore follows that as a relational construct that requires situated action ([Eacott, 2016](#)), leading is contingent on the context of the school environment -who is there and what event is unfolding. In times of crisis, effective

communication emerges as a cornerstone of leadership (Bishop *et al.*, 2015) especially within educational settings where the stakes include the well-being of staff, students, and the broader community. As Sutherland (2017) points out, the possible outcomes of a crisis, whether positive or negative, are dependent on “technical dynamics” of the response and the “cultural dynamics” within the school community (p.4).

The data presented in this article are used to form a typology which categorises the various dimensions of communication during crises that school leaders can deploy. Figure 1 maps the typology of communication we generated from the data analysis. While this model is ambitious given the number of participants, it captures nuanced, context-dependent aspects of crisis leadership. This framework emphasises the urgency, emotional labour, and rapid decision-making unique to crisis scenarios. Each category reflects a specific challenge or strategy and is supported by real-life examples and quotations from research participants.

This typology offers a framework that leaders can use to balance urgent response strategies with transparent, empathetic, and trust-building interactions. Table 1 is a reflective self-assessment tool for individual leaders or leadership teams.

While the typology of crisis communication is grounded in data from three schools, it captures recurring challenges and responses that are heightened during natural disaster crises. Unlike generic communication models (Haupt, 2021; Wang, 2022), this framework integrates the need for urgent, emotionally attuned, and ethically complex communication strategies demanded in school crisis situations. Elements such as real-time risk assessment, transparent advocacy, and trauma-informed engagement (Charteris *et al.*, 2025) distinguish this typology from everyday communication approaches. Moreover, it is tailored to crises in schooling contexts. Future research with a larger number of participants would further refine and validate the model’s specificity to school crisis contexts.

Figure 2 provides a tool that leaders can use to continually refine approaches to communication, with a view to specifically ensure safety, trust, and resilience across their school communities.

Trust, safety, and sustainability of operational continuity

The typology highlights how trust-building in crisis conditions depend on communicative practices that combine care with competence. Uncertainty is acknowledged without amplifying panic. Rationales for decision are articulated and relational assurance is maintained through visible, ethically grounded messaging. The findings suggest that safety is strengthened when communication makes risk thresholds explicit. This supports rapid coordination with staff and relevant agencies (e.g. fire crew, police and other first responders). Leaders can codify escalation protocols, clarify who decides what and under which conditions, and rehearse multi-channel safety messaging so that clarity is maintained, even when time is compressed and information is partial.

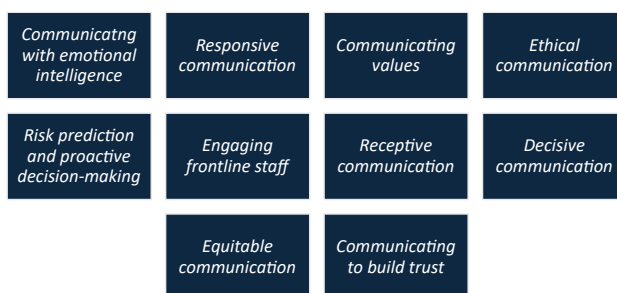


Figure 1. A typology of crisis communication

Table 1. A framework of questions to support trust, safety and the sustainability of operational continuity

Response	Example
<i>Communicating with emotional intelligence (trust and safety)</i>	
Empathy check	When a crisis arises, how can I check in with the emotional states of my staff and community before making decisions?
Emotional balance	In what ways do I acknowledge my own emotions while staying focused on supporting others during high-stress moments?
Emotional awareness	What approaches can I use to identify and address signs of stress among my team, especially when their personal circumstances are at stake?
Exuding calm	How do I demonstrate composure and resilience so that my emotional responses do not escalate anxiety in others?
<i>Responsive communication (trust and safety)</i>	
Needs assessment	How can I systematically determine the most pressing needs of my community (physical, emotional, or informational) during a crisis?
Adaptive strategies	When existing communication channels fail (e.g. power outages, limited internet), what backup methods do I have in place to reach my school community quickly?
Community engagement	How can I create opportunities for parents, students, and staff to tell me what they need, so I can respond effectively and promptly?
Feedback loops	How can I gather ongoing feedback to ensure my response remains aligned with the community's evolving needs?
<i>Communicating values (trust and sustainability)</i>	
Core values	Which key values (e.g. safety, care, inclusivity) guide my decisions and messaging during a crisis?
Deeds aligned with words	How do I ensure that my decisions around resourcing (human and material) reflect the values I communicate?
Visibility of care	In what ways do I demonstrate care for the well-being of families and staff?
School community connectedness	What steps do I take to reinforce a sense of collective responsibility and belonging within my school community?
<i>Ethical communication (trust, safety and sustainability)</i>	
Advocacy and boundary setting	When education authorities make requests that I believe may harm staff, how comfortable am I in pushing back or negotiating on their behalf?
Integrity under pressure	How do I maintain honesty and transparency when delivering difficult news or facing conflicting demands?
Role modelling	How can I demonstrate ethical leadership so that staff and students see integrity in my decision-making?
<i>Risk prediction and proactive decision-making (safety and sustainability)</i>	
Preventative measures	How do I stay informed about emerging threats (e.g. wildfires) so I can initiate precautionary measures promptly?
Scenario planning	What processes are in place for evaluating worst-case scenarios and preparing contingency plans (e.g. early school closures)?
Timely communication	How do I share risk assessments with staff and the community without inciting undue panic?
Data-informed decisions	What types of evidence or expert input guide my judgment about whether and when to close the school or evacuate?
<i>Engaging frontline staff (trust, safety and sustainability)</i>	
Role clarity	To what extent are frontline staff aware of their specific communication responsibilities (e.g. managing phone trees, social media updates)?
Empowerment	In what ways do I empower frontline staff to make decisions quickly when I might not be immediately available?
Professional development	What professional learning do I provide so staff can handle high-pressure interactions or media inquiries effectively?
Feedback processes	How can I encourage frontline staff to share real-time insights or challenges so we can adapt our communication strategies during unfolding events?

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Response	Example
<i>Receptive communication (trust and sustainability)</i>	
Open dialogue	What avenues (formal and informal) exist for staff, parents, and students to voice their experiences or concerns after a crisis?
Community knowledge	In what ways do I learn from local expertise, such as long-time residents with crisis experience, beyond official protocols?
Follow-through	To what extent do I circle back to people who raise concerns or suggestions to update them on actions taken?
Iterative learning	After significant events, how do I incorporate stories and lessons learned into planning for future crises?
<i>Communicating to build trust (trust and sustainability)</i>	
Consistency	To what extent does my messaging remain consistent across different platforms (social media, newsletters, in-person announcements)?
Visible leadership	To what extent am I present and accessible in the community?
Clarity of purpose	How do I ensure that the school community understand the basis for my decisions?
Balancing realism and hope	How do I offer hope while still communicating the seriousness of the crisis?
<i>Decisive communication (safety and trust)</i>	
Collaboration and decisiveness	How do I balance the need for quick decisions with the value of seeking input from relevant stakeholders?
Timeliness	How quickly can I mobilise communication channels to disseminate critical information?
Navigating differences	When different stakeholder groups have opposing needs or perspectives, how do I resolve these tensions decisively?
Lessons learned	After taking action, how do I debrief with my leadership team and community to move forward?
<i>Equitable communication (safety and trust)</i>	
Inclusive outreach	Which communication methods ensure I reach parents or staff with limited internet access, language barriers, or additional vulnerabilities?
Fair prioritisation	How do I decide whose concerns or requests take priority when resources are scarce?
Cultural awareness	What cultural and linguistic factors do I need to consider that affect the clarity or reception of crisis messages?
Shared decision-making	When possible, how do I involve community members or representative groups in shaping crisis responses?

The typology shows that continuity is sustained by communication that coordinates operational adaptations (learning delivery, staffing, attendance expectations, reopening and recovery) and that stabilises routines where possible. This implies the value of continuity communication planning as a distinct component of crisis readiness. In particular there is attention to communicating transitions, roles, timelines, and recovery pathways to reduce organisational drift. Practically, the typology can be used as a diagnostic and developmental tool by leaders and systems to self-audit crisis-communication readiness. Used in this way, the typology could support deliberate preparation and post-event learning.

Research on crises in schools mainly centres on prevention and the approaches taken to mitigate impacts during and immediately after crisis events (Mutch, 2014). Multifaceted communication is integral to this work (Striepe and Kafa, 2025). Each school, community, and landscape is different, and each crisis is born of unique circumstances. While it is well acknowledged that context significantly impacts leadership practices (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2016; Gurr and Drysdale, 2018) educators and researchers may find the findings relatable and applicable across a range of crisis scenarios. The data explored in this paper highlight the importance of establishing practices based on building resilience,

Typology item	Trust-building	Ensuring safety	Operational continuity
Communicating with emotional intelligence	Conveys care and steadiness; reduces anxiety and defensiveness	Supports calm sensemaking and coherence during high-stress information sharing	Stabilises staff capacity; sustains relationships through disruption
Ethical communication	Signals integrity, fairness, and good faith under pressure	Clarifies duty-of-care; legitimises restrictive protective actions	Sets boundaries for sustainable work; supports recovery
Risk prediction and proactive decision-making	Builds confidence through foresight; offers coherent rationale	Accelerates decisions; reduces risk through early protective moves	Minimises disruption through planned transitions and contingencies
Engaging frontline staff	Strengthens relational credibility through inclusion and shared ownership	Improves situational intelligence and feasible, grounded safety actions	Enables distributed coordination of staffing, logistics, and routines
Receptive communication	Demonstrates listening; supports repair and relational assurance	Detects emerging risks, barriers, and misinformation quickly	Informs adaptive adjustments to plans and ongoing operations
Communicating to build trust	Makes decisions intelligible; sustains legitimacy through transparency	Increases adherence by explaining rationale and expectations clearly	Maintains cohesion for reopening, recovery timelines, and routines
Decisive communication	Signals competence; reduces uncertainty through clear direction	Supports timely protective action with unambiguous instructions	Prevents drift; coordinates rapid shifts to alternative arrangements
Communicating values	Aligns words and actions; strengthens legitimacy and care	Frames safety as non-negotiable; guides judgement of risk consistently	Prioritises wellbeing while sustaining learning and community cohesion
Responsive communication	Shows attentiveness; strengthens confidence through timely updates	Adjusts messaging to changing conditions and key directives (e.g., from fire crew, police)	Supports iterative replanning and recovery coordination over time
Equitable communication	Signals fairness; reaches quiet or marginalised stakeholders	Ensures safety messages reach everyone despite access barriers	Reduces uneven disruption; supports participation in learning and recovery

Figure 2. Relationship between trust-building, safety, and operational continuity

community care and belonging and finding practical means for repair and recovery. Each process or step communicated needs to be clear and address immediate needs. But there is also a need to keep in mind the goals of long-term and stable recovery.

Leaders in the schools spoke of the need for keeping school life as normal as possible during the natural disaster, ensuring that planned activities continued where feasible. The minimisation of disruption was seen as a means to build confidence in the future and maintain a sense of stability. Crisis leadership is premised on relational practice, where communication is required to support extensive delegation and a proactive stance toward arising dilemmas (Rørstad Welle and Gunnulfsen, 2025; Adams *et al.*, 2023).

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study draws on a small group of Australian school leaders and focuses on catastrophic wildfire events. As such, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Accounts are retrospective and may privilege salient moments over routine practices. Crisis communication capacities are also shaped by jurisdictional policy settings, resourcing, local geography, and digital infrastructure. Transferability to other contexts and crisis types should therefore be undertaken cautiously. Nonetheless, the typology is offered as a heuristic to support analytic transferability and practical reflection, with further research needed to test and refine the framework across crisis types and education systems.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings have implications for policy, professional practice, and leadership development in education systems increasingly affected by climate-related crises. At the policy level, the typology provides a framework for the development of system-wide crisis communication protocols that integrate relational, ethical, and operational dimensions of leadership. This includes clarifying escalation procedures, defining communication roles, and embedding multi-channel strategies that remain functional under conditions of infrastructural disruption.

For professional learning, the findings indicate the need to move beyond procedural crisis management toward the development of communication capabilities that are emotionally

attuned, ethically grounded, and adaptive to uncertainty. As [Newstead and colleagues \(2026\)](#) observe, leader practice needs to take account of ethical considerations which includes “acting with humanity, justice, and prudence” (p. 62). Leadership preparation programmes and professional development initiatives can draw on the typology as a basis for scenario-based training and reflective practice.

At the school level, the typology and accompanying reflective tool offer a practical mechanism for auditing and strengthening crisis readiness. Leadership teams can use the framework to evaluate existing communication practices, identify gaps in equity and access, and rehearse coordinated responses prior to crisis events. The research contributes not only to theoretical understandings around crisis leadership communication, but also to the development of actionable strategies that support resilient school communities.

Conclusion

It has been noted that many current theories and frameworks of educational leadership fall short when it comes to addressing the unique demands and intensity that leaders experience during times of crisis ([Striepe and Cunningham, 2021](#)). As [Striepe and Cunningham \(2021\)](#) explain, these models have not been shaped by empirical research set in high-stakes contexts, where lives may be endangered and the emotional and psychological well-being of students, staff, and community members is profoundly impacted. Furthermore, existing leadership models often overlook the heightened moral, ethical, and pastoral responsibilities that crises impose. The participants in this study were at the frontline of crises and the typology presented here is anchored in their lived experiences of navigating acute threats, safeguarding their communities, and making ethically complex decisions under extraordinary pressure. The research offers both practical and theoretical contributions to the field of educational leadership. Practically, it presents a grounded typology of communication strategies employed by school leaders during catastrophic wildfire events. These strategies, ranging from emotionally intelligent responses to risk-informed and ethical decision-making, are not only relevant in natural disaster contexts but also transferable to other crisis situations such as pandemics or community trauma.

The reflective tool embedded in the typology provides school leaders with a framework for self-assessment and team dialogue, promoting preparedness, resilience, and relational leadership. Theoretically, the study extends existing literature on crisis leadership by emphasising the relational, context-dependent, and trust-based dimensions of communication. It foregrounds leadership as a situated, socially constructed practice that unfolds through interrelationships and associated patterns of interaction, rather than through top-down directives alone. This grounded perspective provides insights into forms of leadership and communication that are distinct from those described in conventional models, highlighting the practical realities and relational demands of leading schools through crisis events.

Key communication strategies have been identified which have been implemented by school principals during and after catastrophic fires and floods. While each community is unique, common threads emerged, particularly the importance of a care-based approach to rebuilding and restoration. The dimensions of leadership communication outlined here can serve as a framework for educators, as it offers an overview of the communication dynamics warranted in crisis situations. Although much has been written about educators’ responses to COVID-19 ([Daas et al., 2025](#); [Peltola et al., 2024](#); [Lien et al., 2023](#); [Adams et al., 2021, 2023](#)), the sudden and destructive nature of natural disasters presents distinct challenges ([Mutch, 2015](#); [Smith and Riley, 2012](#)). The communication focus of this study may assist educators and policymakers in preparing for future disasters. Moreover the findings highlight the critical role of effective communication in fostering trust, maintaining continuity, and promoting resilience in school communities. There is also value in supporting distributed leadership in post-crisis recovery and resourcing ([Mutch, 2015](#)). As crises become more frequent and

complex, ongoing attention to responsive, ethical, and inclusive communication will be essential in strengthening leadership capacity in schools.

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ChatGPT-5.2 was used in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, it was deployed for minor editorial refinement which involved correcting typographical errors, clarifying sentence structure, and improving consistency in terminology and referencing. The research design, data analysis and all interpretive work remain the authors' responsibility.

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Corresponding author

Adele Nye can be contacted at: anye@une.edu.au

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