

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.

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*Getting Back to a “New Normal”***INTRODUCTION**

Dawson College is an English-language CEGEP¹ 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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some leaders found effectiveness by fully experiencing and feeling certain emotions (deep acting). Participants described deep acting as going into professional mode.

School leaders felt a high degree of responsibility for restoring order and for easing the pain and suffering they witnessed. However, researchers had little to say with regards to the concrete strategies these leaders enacted to restore the school community to a liveable balance. Though some strategies to avert school shootings and keep schools safe have been elaborated (Barton, 2009; Cornell & Williams, 2006; Daniels et al., 2010; Gajda, 2002), appropriate leadership actions in the aftermath must be delineated.

THIS INQUIRY

Methodology

This project employed a qualitative methodology, which is more conducive to understanding the meaning attributed by participants to events and how context influences and affects action, while also identifying unanticipated phenomena (Maxwell, 2013). A cross-case comparative approach (Merriam, 1998) was used since it is flexible and adaptable in describing multiple realities; transferable to other contexts to build a foundation of description; and congruent with the ethics and values of trauma researchers (Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Riddell, 1989).

Method

In-depth individual interviews were the primary method of data collection (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) with ten senior administrators or managers at Dawson College. Interviews were an interactive collaborative process, minimizing hierarchical relationships. An open-ended narrative format was used to develop trust and rapport, and to facilitate a maximum exploration of the participants' experiences and leadership actions. A narrative way of knowing represents the way people tell stories about their grounded experiences, their interpretive, unfolding autobiographies in process. It is the natural mode through which individuals make sense of their lives (Bruner, 1990) and reflect their underlying meaning-making processes (Vygotsky, 2012/1934). Strict adherence to the *Tri-Council Policy* (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2018) was followed. Clearance was obtained both from Dawson College Ethics Review Board and the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee. All interviews were conducted in person and audiotaped, while maintaining ethical considerations regarding distress.

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Analysis

A general framework for processing the data was created and used consistently across the cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data reduction occurred as data was categorized into similar themes (Ely et al., 1997). Propositional statements characterizing the themes were formed, and rules were developed for categorizing the data to keep the theme internally consistent. Narratives were bundled into lived and told stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) that reflected the effective leadership actions linked to an overarching theme and represented the participants' lived professional knowledge. This process proceeded until the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were fulfilled: exhaustion of data sources, saturation of themes, emergence of regularities, and overextension. The data was subjected to various procedures to insure trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

It Takes a Community to Heal a School

The main theme that emerged from the interviews concerned balancing the tension between ruminating too much on the shooting and denying that the event had a long lasting, deeply traumatic impact. The general sentiment held that Dawson experienced a terrible tragedy that must be remembered, but that this shooting was not its defining moment. In order to walk this tightrope between denial and obsessive rumination, administrators talked about a reframing that incorporated this dialect, which they termed *getting back to the new normal*. As the Director of Administrative Services, Terry³ noted, "*It's not so much that it never happened, but in order for us to be able to move on we have to get back to that sense of normalcy.*"

Elements initiated by the senior administrators for the community to facilitate getting back to the new normal were salient assistance from external supports; collaborative teamwork; and most importantly, grief leadership that inspired many interventions designed to help Dawson regain balance.

Grief Leadership

Though conventional notions of leadership were shared in the interviews, constructed as top-down directives, these were mostly described during the initial response within minutes of the shooting: directing people away from the atrium where the shooting was occurring, evacuating the College, and channelling information from police officials and the hospitals to the wider school community.

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Grief leadership (Ingraham, 1987), on the other hand, entails modelling appropriate ways in which to express sorrow and anger. It is comprised of behaviours and statements by key community leaders that serve to facilitate healthy coping with loss and grief among members of a group, organization, or community (Bartone et al., 1994). In this way, public officials, such as school administrators, can facilitate a community’s grieving process by explicitly confronting difficult and uncomfortable situations with principled, courageous action typifying transformative leadership (Glanz, 2007). Within this leadership model, effective leaders create optimum recovery environments through the use of social support systems to share feelings of loss; open communication; and personal sharing of experiences and feelings. These actions emphasize the normality and necessity of grieving. In confronting grief associated with group loss, effective leaders take actions that have the effect of unifying the community in the mourning process. Zinner and Williams (1999) suggest that grief leadership is important because recognized authority figures, whose influence in the community is enhanced during times of communal need and vulnerability, can readily and appropriately guide members to cope, even when the emotional ground is still shaky. Effective grief leadership helps members and communities to return to effective performance. In this way, they can direct and facilitate practical recovery; however, grief leadership also maintains a vision of unity and team spirit for staff. Leaders have the opportunity to be symbolic representations of stability, direction, *and* emotional transparency; in other words, human. At Dawson, this type of leadership was, by far, seen as the most crucial, especially in the early days after the shooting and subsequently throughout the year. It was enacted initially by encouraging other administrators to share their experiences within hours of the shooting. Donna, the manager of communications described the first moment when the news hit the administrative team:

All of a sudden Paul started to speak in a monotone and when we heard the words, we all stopped talking...we realized he was the only one who knew what had happened. And what he was telling us was so horrific...what he was saying finally hit him... he just kind of went back against the wall and slumped down.

Being sensitive to the emotions and grief of others, and oneself, is a hallmark of effective grief leadership. Being able to appropriately show emotion allows members of the community to grieve and comfort, an important step in healing (Zinner & Williams, 1999). This capacity stood out in the administrators that were interviewed. Donna explained how this surfaced:

My boss [Richard] walked into the room...I’ve never seen...utter devastation. So, everybody was kind of holding back because nobody had ever seen him that way.

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But I have no inhibitions with him, so I just walked up to him and I kind of went like this [extending her arms]. And he said, “I just came from...I just got briefed and we lost a student...and she’s dead...” And I just had my hands like this, and he just walked right into them and kind of crumpled on me...

Terry also identified the key interpersonal features of effective educative leadership that strongly aligns with the grief leadership model: informality, trust, mutual obligations, personal patronage and bonds of fealty and loyalty (Macpherson & Vann, 1996):

I could see Richard was very upset and emotional about it...it was very clear to me that he had a good sense of where we were going...so I always turned to him... if he thinks that’s the right way to go, that’s certainly where I would go. I trusted him implicitly...

Grief Leadership in Action

The first decisive action taken in the wake of the shooting was to send representatives to the various hospitals where injured students and one staff member were being treated. This displayed the deep caring and values-grounded approach that is a crucial, salient element of grief leadership. Don, the Interim Academic Dean, who oversaw all matters academic, described what guided his actions in those early hours:

My focus was on survivors...students, faculty. So, the first decision I made was I sent various teams to the hospitals because I needed to know the enormity... because we hadn’t really heard much news...so we sent out different teams to different places.

The enactment of a values-grounded approach provided the guiding principles for many of the administrative decisions that followed, categorized by Don as three main threads:

Organizational...Who’s going to do what? What’s going to get done? Does this make it happen? Do you need extra resources? Let’s go find them... Motivational, in the sense that everybody was motivated to make things happen...but the other big chunk of it is, what I would call, inspirational...Just keeping everybody aware... there’s a bigger reason...what’s the best thing we can do for the students? What’s the best thing we can do for the families? What’s the best thing we can do for our employees? How are we going to help them? And trying to make sure that was always there at top of their minds...

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Dawson administrators were conscious that they needed to embody these values and act in alignment with them. Don did that deliberately and mindfully:

I tried to make myself a role model in the way I made decisions...When we were having formal meetings, to keep the agenda at an elevated level... notwithstanding, there were sort of tasking things to get done. To try to keep the level of discussion a little higher...to try not to lose the spirit of team.

Caring and concern for the grief stricken were primary considerations and guiding principles. Significantly, that included supporting the family of the student, Anastasia, who died. Administrators, especially Donna, built a relationship with the family that grew over a prolonged period of time:

I just felt we needed to reach out to this family, and it turned out to be reciprocal because for them it was important that they became close to the place where their daughter had spent her last minutes and to make some sense out of what happened and why her...

Within hours after the shooting, administrators determined there was a pressing need for support from external sources. Recognizing that psychological services are an integral part of healing in the aftermath of any trauma, administrators took advantage of an offer of assistance from a local community psychiatrist who was associated with a local hospital and a community-based crisis centre. They invited him, along with a colleague, to participate as full members of the decision-making administrative committee.

Since organizing an information session for the members of the Dawson community would be next to impossible, information was imparted via their website. Jonathan, the school's Webmaster, also developed a virtual forum for individuals to connect with one another:

The person who managed WebCT at the time created a section where people can talk and discuss and communicate together in a closed environment. So, I just made sure that the support was there on the site...that was pretty active. I was actually in there at one point...posting a few messages... “We got this online. We got that online. Go check it out.” People were definitely using it...sharing their stories, sharing what they did, where they were, how they got out. Sharing support. I think some of the faculty were even giving home phone numbers for contact.

Two days after the shooting a large assembly for faculty and staff was held; about 800 people crowded into the gym. But before people even entered the gym,

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they were offered tangible signs of support and caring. Paul, the manager of Student Services, gave a concrete description of what that meant:

It’s quite a walk down to the gym because it’s three floors down. So, we had people at different levels...As people came down, there were different managers from the different services who were able to see whether it was their employees or their departments...we were able to greet, hug, whatever. I think staff and faculty felt kind of...this is reassuring. “We’re not just going down an empty stairwell into the gym where we’ve never been before.” There was a presence [at every level]. It was not only practical but it was also kind of symbolic.

An information session was held for parents the week following the shooting, soon after the College re-opened, so they could have some idea how to support their children and know if further intervention was warranted. As Donna stated, “*It was very important to meet with parents because the kids would seem to be bouncing back, but parents were still extremely nervous...so, they set up an evening at the synagogue next door.*”

As days passed, Terry described how administrators modelled grief leadership by displaying their own emotional reactions to the shooting, de-stigmatizing expressions of grief for others in the Dawson community:

So, everyone’s gathered. I get up to talk, and I started off... “You know, I’m really happy to see so many of you here.” And then I broke down crying again...I’m well known within the College because of the position I have, but am I well known on a personal basis by a lot of employees? Not necessarily. And certainly, I felt that I wasn’t embarrassed for having cried, but I also felt in a way it gave other people permission...

Finding the New Normal

Grief leadership might be best illustrated by the development of Don’s administrative “motto” that functioned as a compass to navigate the murky waters of the new normal in the days and months following the shooting: Patience, Flexibility, Sensitivity:

I asked them for three things: patience, flexibility, sensitivity...Those are the things that are going to keep it together for us...patience because we aren’t really sure what we’re doing here. We are trying our best. We’re going to get it wrong, parts of it. Just, be patient. Be patient with your students. Be patient with each other. You know, there’s a lot of pain. Flexibility...we can decide now that this is the best way to go, but in an hour from now, it could change. We’re learning as we go, so we

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need you to be flexible, and we need you to be flexible in your classrooms...And sensitivity...There're a lot of people hurting here, and just, you know, be sensitive... That set a tone.

At the same time, a fluid structural configuration created the day after the shooting used participative strategies to include many individuals from within and external to the Dawson community. Subcommittees tasked with getting the College ready for re-opening, including support services for students, faculty, and staff, took on a starfish-like configuration (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006). Teams were agile, independent, self-organized, and self-managed with power decentralized, distributed, and delegated to the team, organized around a simple mission. Drago, the manager of Plant and Facilities observed, *“It was almost magical in the sense that everybody worked individually as one.”* This team-based management approach created a supportive network, which allowed individuals to navigate unknown territory, but not alone. As Terry remarked, *“Well, I guess I was comforted by that to some extent. I wasn't just going to be thrown out there and have to come up with ideas.”*

Teams were interdependent in that they were networked together by scheduled meetings: representatives of the teams would gather three times per day, morning, lunchtime, and at the end of the day, to exchange information, solutions, and challenges, then bring back whatever was gathered from the networked meetings to their team. The traditional power, the Director-General, Richard, elaborated on the loose structure:

All these subcommittees started to work on various tasks. There was a group around the Academic Dean that was responsible to carry forward every single condition for the re-start of the academic activities...the calendar...all these things. A second group around the Director of Plant and Facilities had the responsibility to make sure that the building was restored on time. The third group was around the Director of Student Services, when students will come back to Dawson, under which condition will they be welcomed. And the fourth group around the Director of Human Resources was for employees and staff...what sort of assistance should we be providing right on the spot.

He was free to float among the teams, and to attend to higher-level negotiations with government agencies, echoing the concept of transformational leader as social architect (Glanz, 2007).

Teams structured on the starfish model do not need to rely on instructions being handed down from some expert in order to be effective; instead, they create an environment where learning and problem-solving through discovery and development

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can occur and collaboration is encouraged, drawing out the full potential of teams members. Ray, the Director of Student Services remarked:

Oftentimes [management] have silo mentalities, which I don't think is uncommon in an educational institution. But never before and not since, have we ever worked together the way we did in the month that followed that shooting. It didn't matter what department you were working in, the sense of community that grew out of that lasted almost six months.

People were trusted to bring their expertise to this difficult situation. For example, in evacuating the College the day of the shooting, approximately 10,000 people left their possessions wherever they happened to be. This amounted to thousands of purses, knapsacks, phones, books, and other personal belongings strewn around the building. How were these items to be returned? Managers on the crisis management team called in some of their staff and a few were selected to carry out this sensitive task based on their organizational skills and strength of character. In less than two days, volunteers managed to collect and catalogue all of these belongings. Caring for those volunteers who worked long days then became a concern. Carey-Ann, the communications assistant observed, “*We talked about what we would need. We said we would need food because people would be here—just basic things...you need food. People are going to be here all day. They can't go on empty stomachs.*”

Diane, the Dean of Social Science and Business Technologies, was the main liaison with healthcare workers and a member of the team tasked with psychological support. The team took the stance that a major share of the support would most likely be extended informally (Ayers, 1989) by staff and faculty. “*A lot of it would be done by employees...you're there and you're helping. And so that it was important to recognize that and to actually try to give them a mini training and...allow them also to grieve together.*” Therefore, administrators wanted to supply them with information about what to expect, and how to effectively extend support. Richard described the approach that was taken during the faculty and staff assembly:

We asked [a psychologist faculty member] to come with us in front. Maybe 80% of our staff were there...800 people in the gym. I think they heard what they needed to hear from one of their kind, the faculty, and he's a specialist in this sort of thing. So, he told them, “Okay when you're going to get back in the classroom, you will face this sort of reaction— and here is how you should deal with these reactions, how you should talk to students...”

Written material was handed out so that individuals could refer to these suggestions and strategies throughout the semester. Administrators struck a balance between

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acknowledging the expertise of the staff and faculty and knowing that they were facing a situation for which they had not been trained. In keeping with the view that they were facing a new normal, the team drew up a strategy that would enable students to successfully complete a semester that began so traumatically and outlined various ways faculty could pedagogically support students. Don, as Academic Dean, outlined the compassionate expectations:

My role was to make sure that the faculty understood what my expectations were with regards to the academic calendar. There was one point when one of the teachers asked me about what's going to happen in the classroom, and what should we do, and what are we going to do about the work that's missed and...I said, “Well, you're the professionals. You just do what you think is important. At the end, tell me what you did. Okay? But I'm not going to tell you what to do. You are the teacher.” Well, I don't know how many people said to me afterwards, “Thank you for that...Thank you for respecting our professionalism.”

The ethos that permeated the creation and decision-making of the agile subcommittees was infused into expectations about faculty decisions regarding coursework completion and requirements As Donna noted:

Teachers were put in leadership positions to flag any problem in their classroom, be it a repeated absence that was unexplained, a behaviour that wasn't normal, work that wasn't being given in...This was one of the messages that got put out to the faculty and staff: You're the eyes and ears in the classrooms. We can't be everywhere. There's not a psychologist in every room. So, their responsibility for their kids became that much more important and, that turned out to be very community-building.

In returning the College to a liveable balance, academic allowances had to be made. Higher educational institutions in Quebec are public, funded by the government, and subject to regulation as to the number of class days, deadlines for dropping or adding courses, and the number of students registered by certain dates. During the information session for faculty, potential academic allowances were delineated by Diane:

Flexibility, sensitivity, patience: that was the motto. So, every decision— because I had to make a decision every five seconds as soon as school started— it was always those three things. Whether students would take advantage of us, [that] was fine. I said, “It's okay.” So, every rule that we have was sort of no longer really important for that one semester. So, it meant for example, that the technical rules like you can't

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drop after a certain day, not being able to write exams on time, submitting papers late, missing class...any of that was within reason, we were saying, “It’s okay.”

Diane also coordinated special arrangements and allowances that had to be made for students who were severely injured so that they could keep up with their studies, as far as they were able, if they chose that option:

For each student injured, there was something different because their needs were different. One student couldn’t come back to school. All of her teachers were willing to help and all of them were willing to go to her home to help her out. So, I got a laptop for her and wireless technology, and she did a full semester at home.

Administrators acknowledged that this event would have a long-lasting impact. Therefore, these allowances were explicitly in place for the rest of the semester and were a guide for the rest of the year, if necessary. Donna stated:

We weren’t going to put kids through, “So, what did you see? How badly did it affect you? Why didn’t you come back to school after a month? Did you still feel...?” Instead of putting them through all that, those rules were relaxed that year just so that they could not feel that on top of everything else they were going to have to be grilled about why.

Flexibility and sensitivity also extended into non-academic initiatives, as noted by Paul:

Our athletic therapist who generally just treats our student athletes...a number of students who were wounded did need some form of therapy. They felt more comfortable here, so we set that up for them...so it was adjusting some of the things that we did to accommodate not only students who were physically injured, but also those who were emotionally injured as well.

This agile, flexible approach to the interim organizational structure was a primary reason the College could re-open five days after the shooting with a prepared response to the trauma in place. This enormous accomplishment was evident to the staff and faculty when they returned. Ray revealed, “*One of the staff came up to the microphone and said, ‘You guys are real heroes for what you’ve done to help us get back in here.’ They realized the thought and the effort that had gone into [that].*”

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Back to School

In tackling the challenge of providing psychological support for 10,000 members of the Dawson community, administrators and their external support system decided to provide massive on-site counselling services as soon as school re-opened on day five after the shooting. Counselling services would be stationed in locations around the building; floaters would circulate to monitor reactions. Carey-Ann noted that services were provided not just for the first week, but also for an extended period:

If they needed to talk to a mental health professional, they were there [at the College] for two weeks...three weeks, every day in the library...If you were fine in the beginning, and then six days later, all of a sudden, you weren't fine, they were there. There was no stigma attached.

When it came time to re-open, administrators saw their primary role as protectors of students to reduce further harm and re-traumatization. Sensitivity to the emotions and grief of others and self again became the consistent and underlying theme as administrators demonstrated grief leadership moment by moment, adjusting as the situation demanded. Sometimes they functioned as buffers between students and the crush of local, national, and international media. As Carey-Ann recounted, “*You just had to make sure that [journalists] respected the fact that some people did want to talk and were fine, and some people were not. You have to sort of oversee that.*”

Donna brought a unique perspective regarding the disposition of the memorials of flowers and stuffed animals that surrounded the College:

There was a sea of flowers in front. So, some really practical people...said, “Oh, well, we can make them all disappear overnight.” And I was like, “No, you can't. This is a huge symbol.” You can't just clear them away.

The flowers were composted and later formed an integral part of the Peace Garden. The Dawson community wanted to create a memorial to Anastasia's spirit and a living testament to those who suffered pain and immeasurable loss. Many thought that a plaque or monument could not capture the essence of a young life cut short or the vibrancy of Dawson. Therefore, the College built an ecological garden that would bring together a number of elements: peace and remembrance, teaching and learning, environmental renewal, beauty and serenity. A flowering almond was planted in Anastasia's memory.

Paul remarked that the same care was taken with the cards and letters of support. “*We collected the cards if they were addressed to Anastasia or her parents. We*

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asked them if they would like to receive those...People obviously left those things as expressions of support...you can't really just discard them.”

Don was particularly vigilant about reactions to students as they re-entered the school the first time since the shooting:

I remember there was...spontaneous applause. The teachers and the staff that were there started applauding everybody that came in. And then, people were saying to me, “Students don't like it. They are not comfortable with it.” So, I remember having to go around, telling people, stop applauding. “I know it's a spontaneous thing, and you want to encourage them, but there are many students who are feeling uncomfortable. They don't want to be applauded. They just want to come in and pick up their books, or they want to go and sit with their classmates.”

He later made a point to reach out to fellow faculty and staff once Dawson has resumed its routine:

I remember the one-week anniversary...I just decided I'd walk around the school. I just knocked on people's offices and said, “So, how are you?” I was realizing, well, this is where these people were the week before. They were in that class, or they were in their office doing this.

Weaving a Collective Narrative: Stories of the New Normal

Over the course of the year, stories of courage, compassion and altruism were shared and became absorbed into the collective narrative that described the new normal of Dawson College. These served to counterbalance the imposed narrative the shooter tried to force onto the school community. Additionally, they served the important function of recognizing those individuals who had distinguished themselves through extraordinary service, an important component of the recovery process of a community (Norwood & Ursano, 1997). Stories were told about the courage of students, staff, faculty, and administrators. These stories became the current reality of who the Dawson community was, and what they stood for:

Donna: This other kid...the one that got the gun pointed into his face, and he kept on getting asked by [the shooter], “Do you want to die today? Do you want to die today?” And J.⁴ running to his defence...it's [his] character to try to help even if it means putting his own life at risk. And so, he had said to the gunman at this point, “Leave him alone. He didn't do anything. Just leave him alone...” The Governor General [of Canada] gave him the Star of Courage...

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Carey-Ann: Y. was the only staff to be shot...while he was pushing a student away from the area because she was walking towards the shooting...And P., a father of four young kids, standing up there in the middle of the atrium, dragging people—and him and V. dragging people while the shooting was going on...instead of... they could've left.

Richard: Our chief security agent...had this sort of intuition that he should call the police at 12:00 instead of waiting for 1:00 as he's usually doing.⁵ So he had this anticipation that something was unfolding...that needed some sort of intervention... So, he did what he had to do, and he helped prevent a real carnage...because there were so many students in this room at lunchtime...

Drago: I said, “If you're afraid that there are more shooters in the building, we have four floors underground that nobody's gone to get yet.” So, the policeman said, “How do we get there?” I said, “Well, I'll take you.” And one of the female officers behind us says, “Here, take my vest...don't worry, I've got two.” So, the police created a team where they were in front. I was kind of shielded in the middle and I guided them where to go and told them what door to open and so on. So, together we evacuated everybody from the bottom floors.

These narratives were not just told, but publicly acknowledged, and became the meta-narrative that the Dawson community began to tell about itself- members responded to this trauma in extraordinary ways in which people could be proud:

Donna: Don's words were so powerful because he said, “We are all victims, but we're all heroes.” And that was so true because...everybody had performed varying degrees of acts of heroism from the biggest act of heroism...to just somebody seeing somebody struggling, and grabbing them and saying, “Out this way...”

These narratives took on a regenerative role and served to be a resilient way that members of the Dawson community worked through the effects of this trauma. Regeneration involves people's efforts to emotionally revitalise and recreate their ordinary lives (Field, 2006). By crafting a forceful oral counter-narrative, this fostered their sense of agency and allowed Dawson to move beyond healing into a generative self-reorganization (Reilly & McBrearty, 2010). These powerful narratives persisted in the institutional memory of the College in the years following the shooting and held emotional resonance for the administrators interviewed.

Getting Back to a “New Normal”**Community Healing Rituals**

Administrators made a conscious decision to focus more of their energy on healing rather than merely on school safety, described by some, as an obsession in today’s schools (Herr & Anderson, 2003). The administrative team deliberately made the policy decision to not turn the school into a prison-like fortress, and consciously tried to walk the tightrope between denial and rumination in the actions they endorsed. This tension was seen in two controversial decisions: one early on, and one at the end of the school year. Don pointed out the first controversial decision was to erase the physical manifestations of the shooting:

One of the questions we had dealt with before the teachers came back— before the staff came back— was what kind of shape should the atrium be in? There were mixed views. I remember there were a couple of people, psychologists, who felt that it should stay the same...all the bullet holes. But most of us felt, “No. Let’s just paint those walls again.” So, there’s a massive clean-up. By the time students were ready to come back, we had really removed any real evidence that anything had happened in the atrium. The physical evidence was gone.

Instead, they focused their energies on the creation of various rituals that lasted the entire year. These actions carried the implicit message that the school was “moving forward through healing.” This theme continued with the reopening of the College just five days after the shooting. Though administrators had a tentative plan of how things might proceed, students had other ideas of what would be most meaningful to them. Students, who had communicated via texting, came up with a more symbolic plan: they would re-enter at the time when the world changed for them. The time of 12:41 pm signalled the time the shooting began outside on the sidewalk:

Don: A lot of students who had come into the building already, just to find out what was going on, to pick up their belongings...left the building, but didn’t go anywhere. They waited outside. And so, at about 12:35, I go outside, and there’s Richard, standing there by the front door...I look up. The whole street’s packed with people. So, there I am, standing in front of the door, and Richard looks at me. He says, so? Like, go say something. So, I did. I just stood up in front, and I just said... “Let’s go back to school.” That was as brilliant as I could get, but it was all they needed... and people just started walking into school. It was an amazing thing.

Carey-Ann observed that administrators were responsive to the community’s needs:

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I think we all took our cue from students. And they were really wonderful. They wanted to show that they weren't scared anymore. They weren't going to let this affect them... “We want to come back. We want to start our lives again...” They dictated what they were ready for and what was needed and what was wanted and we, hopefully, provided that.

Furthermore, the administrators had communicated with department chairs and encouraged them to plan some sort of gathering for students. If they wished, counsellors would be dispatched to the gatherings. Faculty went to classrooms they would normally be using, so if students went there, they would not be alone:

Diane: While it's fine to open the doors to the College, once students are inside, do you plan to do any activity for your programme? So, we were encouraging them, whether they were planning an activity or not, we were encouraging them to have a space where people from their programmes could come and talk if they wanted to and provide the support we felt was needed.

Foam-core panels were set up in strategic locations around Dawson. Students were encouraged to write down their thoughts and feelings. Don suggested that these panels were important documents of the experience and healing process:

We had some in the cafeteria. We had them in the atrium...some next to the library. They stayed for a while, and it was a way for students to express themselves. That was important. We pulled them out on our first anniversary. We took those panels out and placed them around for a couple of days so people could be reminded.

Several weeks after the shooting, a memorial concert was held that was limited to members of the Dawson community to affirm their community connections. Don revealed, “*We had a ceremony up in the reception hall...staff and students came, sang, played instruments...it was just...a way for us all to get together.*”

The community interpreted many milestones and events symbolically through the lens of healing and moving forward:

Diane: As we moved on, I think some of it had to do with just doing what we do, which is ending a semester and having the success rates...that was quite important. Then our hockey team was the best team, and we had a business case competition... we won the two competitions...seeing that we could not just survive but thrive...

The second controversial decision concerned convocation. Administrators felt it should, somehow, note the tragedy. Ray outlined the College's position:

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In all fairness, people are entitled to their opinions. Within the college, there are definitely people who would like to...just pretend it never happened...but it's not necessarily a healthy way to go through life, and I think for our students, it wouldn't have been a healthy way to end the year for them. It was probably the most single impacting event that had happened in their lives to date in this place, and to leave it without even so much as a mention of it having happened would have been troublesome.

Police officers, instrumental in containing the gunman, were recognized at the ceremony. They were given books containing hand-written letters of appreciation from students, staff, and faculty, and received a standing ovation. Stephen Toope, then president and vice-chancellor of the University of British Columbia, gave the commencement address (Toope, 2007). Toope's parents were murdered in their Montréal home. His message reinforced the notion of the new normal:

At every graduation, students and their families can look back at hardships overcome, at difficult tasks accomplished...but this graduation is unique. You are the class that transcended violence and fear. You are the class that fought back simply by getting on with your lives. You are the class that valued learning more than anger, friendship more than enmity, and a future you can shape more than a past you can't erase.

His message resonated with many in the Dawson community:

Donna: He was the right person at the right time with the right words. And the thing for me that was even more gratifying was that he needed it as much as we did, because he had never spoken about it publicly...He hadn't given one interview in the years since [his parents murder] had happened. And for me to have given him that opportunity to reach back and deal with it for himself and to bring it to us, so that we could deal...

Later that summer, as the first anniversary drew near, administrators solicited suggestions from the community as to ways in which Dawson should observe this milestone. Carey-Ann noted:

Just before the first anniversary, we opened it up to the community. “If you have any suggestions on what you would like seen done, not like see done, let us know.” So, they all indicated they wanted to commemorate that first anniversary but in a kind of private way. There was a ceremony outside...the police of Montréal had donated a tree in Anastasia's memory.

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DISCUSSION

Using a complexity view of school leadership (Morrison, 2002), a conceptual understanding of this event and the aftermath can be achieved. The trauma at the College created a significant destabilization of the system. This created an opportunity for Dawson to re-organize itself into a more responsive and compassionate complex adaptive system. The shooting functioned as a bifurcation point, i.e., when a system destabilizes temporarily and subsequently evolves to a higher form of self-organization (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010). In this case, this bifurcation allowed the College to reorganize itself through the prism of grief leadership. Many individuals involved in this project mentioned how the sense of community was stronger in the months and years after the shooting. This open space of possibility was a time of *learning their way through grief*, reflective self-examination, and connection creation. It created the opportunity for purposeful experimentation with alternate structures or relational patterns, values-grounded action, which allowed future possibilities to emerge (Espejo, 2003). The practice of grief leadership allowed the Dawson system to focus on guiding visions, sincere values, and organizational beliefs- the self-referential ideas individuals use to shape their own behaviour (Wheatley, 1999). When the administrative team embodied these principles, it helped Dawson shift its culture, and make these their standard principles. Dawson administrators intentionally changed their leadership practices, so that the system could embody the just and compassionate vision they longed to be (brown, 2017).

The bifurcation point became the birthplace of nondeterministic possibilities and unanticipated emergent phenomena. A renewed sense of purpose and community within Dawson College were achieved through the efforts expended to reopen the school and the subsequent healing strategies that were enacted. This renewed internal connectedness is one way in which the system reorganized itself after this significant destabilization. Additionally, there was a renewed sense of external connectedness, since closer relations with the external environment, including various physical and mental health agencies, the provincial and municipal government, and the police department, were deepened through the development of new networks.

Interactions in complex systems are characterized by nonlinear dynamics (Cilliers, 1998), i.e., the whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of its parts. Administrators found collective reserves of strength, courage and resilience untapped before the shooting, resulting in a sense of community unknown previously, because they chose to learn what was best for the community by adopting a grief leadership stance. Nonlinearity is a process whereby a relatively small change can lead to significantly different system states (Human-Vogel & Brown, 2005), since small changes are amplified as they feedback on each other. Nonlinear dynamics can account for the powerful outcomes of simple actions, such as:

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- The creation of a simple 3-word mantra, *Patience, flexibility, sensitivity* which formed the foundation for many of the leadership decisions for the rest of the school year;
- Dispatching personnel to hospitals which led to a fortuitous meeting with a key community connection for mental health services;
- Deciding to open the school as soon as possible, which fashioned a significant implicit message about the resilience of the institution;
- Acknowledging the key influence faculty and staff could have on monitoring the after-effects of posttraumatic stress syndrome;
- The steadfast insistence on not denying what happened, but refusing to be defined by it; and
- Using the compass *what is best for students* to determine flexibility in shaping and interpreting regulations.

As brown (2017) notes in her discussion on organizations as fractals “*what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system*” (p. 53, emphasis in original).

Knowledge about what constituted the *new normal* became created and embedded in the relationships between Dawson community members by learning their way through their grief. Interactions within these relationships shaped cognitive processes and value positions that resulted in system-wide, distributed, continuous learning and generative problem-solving (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010). These shared cognitions and values fashioned the unpredictable emergent evolution of the new normal that in turn shaped its members, inextricably interconnecting community life and cognition (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Dawson functioned as a dissipative nonlinear dynamic system (an open system operating out of, and often far from, equilibrium in an environment with which it exchanged energy, personnel, information and support), making its way through uncharted territory with expressions of grief, healing strategies, and a 3-word mantra as its compass. Dawson demonstrated its capacity of autopoiesis (self-creation, self-organization, and renewal through redefining the boundary between itself and its environment) in order to maintain community cohesion and its identity over the years following the shooting. This autopoietic response illustrates the close interplay of structure and flow/change. Learning what the new normal required became the main relational activity, and this embodied the Dawson community’s pattern of organization, serving to function as the means for its recurrent invention, exploration, and co-evolutionary adaptation (Capra, 2002). Learning their way through grief was the generative mechanism for the increasing complexity of the Dawson system as members and the community co-evolved within their milieu (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010). The changes wrought by these emergent

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nonlinear dynamics were irreversible, forever changing the nature and the character of Dawson College.

CONCLUSION

With the increasing visibility of school shootings, attention must be paid to responses aimed at the community level (Capewell, 1996; Connolly, 2002/3; Williams et al., 1999). The grief leadership provided by administrators shaped the subsequent healing responses and can be regarded as an effective intervention strategy since it facilitated healthy grief responses for many. Through their own example and their support of various initiatives, the administrators consistently emphasized the importance of acknowledging and experiencing the sense of loss within a supportive social network, thereby avoiding denial, isolation and despair. They created vital avenues of communication and meaningful action within the context of the school community. Terry noted:

For me, one of the things was to recognize in this situation that people needed to be included rather than excluded. And so, the employees wanted to do things and that was the message that kept coming through. So, allow them the space to be involved in the recuperation. You don't have to do it all yourself as a senior administrator. You're looked to for leadership, but you don't have to do it all...make sure that you allow people to participate in the recovery to the extent that they're able...As much as they can, then you let them do that, because that will help them as well. And I think that was part of the key to our success with reintegrating the employees.

Community grief was processed and addressed as an on-going long-term activity. Since research suggests there is no timetable for grief, healing rituals lasted for more than a year and allowed the community to approach their grieving as a highly personal and individual experience. The Dawson community was given the time so that healing could happen gradually, without being forced or hurried. For those who were able to come to terms with their grief in weeks or months, participation in these healing rituals was unnecessary. But for others, whose grieving process is measured in years, there was an opportunity to express their grief, gain comfort from others, and allow their process to naturally unfold.

Dawson administrators did not fall into the trap that some school leaders do when faced with trauma. These administrators took their cues from students and staff, not their own coping styles. In discussing administrative responses during the Oklahoma bombing, Sitterle and Gurwitsch observed:

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Some of the local school principals relied on their own coping styles and ideas as yardsticks to evaluate and make decisions regarding the emotional needs of the young children in their schools. The end result was that some school leaders refused mental health services for their student population, believing their students were not in need. (1999, p. 185)

Don put it most succinctly, *“What’s best for students was probably the most important thing. But in doing that, you account for what’s best for faculty and employees.”* These grounding values helped administrators in how they attempted to give meaning to their horrific experience. In the months and years following the shooting, Dawson played a pivotal role supporting other institutions as they navigated similar situations. Diane explained, *“I chose to say, ‘It happened and there has to be something greater than that.’ And if we need to be able to contribute something whatever it is...because otherwise it doesn’t make any sense.”*

Grief leadership functioned to assist the community to learn how to re-establish balance by creating a new normal. The healing rituals acknowledged the past trauma, but also contained a kernel of hope and the sense of moving forward. And what was the ultimate impact? As Don noted, *“Our applications are up...our returning rate is up...because we didn’t know what to expect. And that was very encouraging in a way. It was like, okay, we did something right.”*

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Getting Back to a “New Normal”**ENDNOTES**

- ¹ A CEGEP is a public post-secondary education collegiate institution exclusive to the province of Quebec in Canada. CEGEP is a French acronym for *Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel*, and generally consists of two-year programmes that parallel grades 12 and 13. A diploma from CEGEP is required for university admission in Quebec.
- ² In line with the policy of Dawson College, the shooter will not be named.
- ³ Participants in this study gave permission for their names to be used.
- ⁴ In order to respect the privacy of individuals who were named but not part of this project, initials are used to identify them.
- ⁵ The security guard noticed that two individuals looked as if they might be dealing drugs outside one of the entrances to the College. Normally the police patrol responsible for that area is on a lunch break at noon, returning at 1 pm. Because the guard opted to call the police before 1 pm, two officers were arriving on the scene just as the shooter began his shooting spree. They immediately called for backup, which arrived within minutes. This timely intervention is credited with ending the shooting and limiting the number of casualties; unfortunately, not before Anastasia was killed.