LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION:
THE JOPLIN SCHOOLS’ STORY

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri- Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

by
JERI GOSWICK
Dr. Cynthia J. MacGregor, Dissertation Supervisor
MAY 2016
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION: THE JOPLIN SCHOOLS’ STORY

presented by Jeri-ann Goswick, a candidate for the degree of doctor of education, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Dr. Cynthia J. MacGregor
Dr. Beth Hurst
Dr. Patricia (T. C.) Wall
Dr. Renee White
DEDICATION

I would like to thank God, my family, and my friends. I thank God for helping me to persevere. Without perseverance, I would have never finished this task. I thank my family for all their love, patience, and understanding as I worked through this very long and arduous task. Finally, I thank so many of my friends for their support, encouragement, and their offers to read my paper. I could not have completed this without you all!
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Professor of Counseling, Leadership and Special Education at Missouri State University (MSU), and Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri (MU). Her leadership throughout the program is unsurpassed. I also greatly appreciate the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Hurst, Dr. Wall, and Dr. White for their support, encouragement, and insightful feedback.

I am particularly thankful for all of the teachers and leaders that I interviewed for the study. Their willingness to give up their valuable time and revisit such a difficult time is their past deserves my greatest respect and admiration. My hope is that other teachers and leaders will benefit from the stories told, and as an educational community, we will have a greater understanding of the world around us. My sincerest thanks to all, Jeri.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION ................................................................. 1
   Statement of the Problem .................................................................................. 3
   Purpose of Study .................................................................................................. 5
   Research Questions ............................................................................................. 6
   Framework .......................................................................................................... 6
   Design of Proposed Study ................................................................................... 8
   Site of the Study .................................................................................................. 9
   Participants of the Study ...................................................................................... 9
   Data Collection Tools .......................................................................................... 10
   Data Analysis ....................................................................................................... 12
   Limitations of the Study ...................................................................................... 12
   Significance of the Study .................................................................................... 13
   Summary .............................................................................................................. 16

II. LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT FOR STUDY ............... 18
   Introduction to Leadership and Organizational Context .................................. 19
   Organizational and Leadership Theory within the Public School Setting .......... 20
   The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Structural Perspective ................................................................. 21
   The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Human Resource Perspective .......................................................... 22
   The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Political Perspective ................................................................. 24
   The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Symbolic Perspective ................................................................. 26
   Organizational and Leadership Context of Joplin Schools ............................... 27
   Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Structural Perspective .......... 29
   Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Human Resource Perspective .... 30
   Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Political Perspective ............... 31
   Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Symbolic and Cultural Perspective .... 32
   Leadership Context of Joplin Schools ................................................................. 33
   Summary .............................................................................................................. 34

III. SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY ............................................. 35
   Introduction ......................................................................................................... 36
   Crises ................................................................................................................... 37
   Definition of Crisis .............................................................................................. 37
   Characteristics of Crisis ....................................................................................... 38
   Educational Institutions and Crises ................................................................. 42
# LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>45</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students During Times of Crisis</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Disasters</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Institutions and Natural Disasters</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Communication During Natural Disasters</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Management</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Management Leadership</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Frame</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Frame</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Frame</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Frame</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Four Frames</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## IV. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

| Lessons in the Aftermath of a Catastrophic Tornado | 66 |
| Crises Promote Empathy | 67 |
| Normal is Different Now | 68 |
| Leaders Need Extra Care | 69 |
| What We Can Learn | 70 |
| What We Can Do Now | 71 |

## V. CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

| Abstract | 77 |
| Lessons Learned in a Crisis Situation: The Joplin Schools’ Story | 78 |
| Background and History | 79 |
| Educational Institutions and Crises | 80 |
| Stakeholders | 82 |
| Students During Times of Crisis | 83 |
| Framework | 84 |
| Research Questions | 85 |
| Methodology | 85 |
| Participants | 86 |
| Data Collection and Procedures | 86 |
| Data Analysis | 87 |
| Limitations of the Study | 87 |
| Findings | 88 |
| Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Structural Frame | 88 |
| Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Human Resource Frame | 94 |
| Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Political Frame | 96 |
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Symbolic Frame .............................................................................................................................. 98

Discussion .................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 100

Recommendations for Future Study .................................................................................................................................................................................. 103

References .................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 104

VI. SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION .................................................................................................................. 108

How has the dissertation influenced your practice as an educational leader? .......................................................... 109

How has the dissertation process influenced you as a scholar? .................................................................................................................. 112

References .................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 114

Appendix A ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 122

Appendix B ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 123

Appendix C ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 125

Appendix D ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 127

Appendix E ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 128

VITA ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 129
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Natural disasters affect millions of lives each year, devastating educational institutions across the world (United States Agency for International Development, USAID, 2010). Since 1980, the United States has sustained more than 178 weather and climate disasters where the overall costs of damages reached or exceeded one billion dollars (U.S. Department of Commerce, USDC, 2014). These natural disasters often affect the infrastructure required to sustain an educational system. Schools are destroyed, teachers and students are displaced, and the damage can be overwhelming; timely recovery is critical and can be the lifeline for those affected by such a crisis (USAID, 2010).

The state of Missouri is located in the center of a region commonly referred to as Tornado Alley (USDC, n.d.). This tornado-prone region, which includes parts of central Texas expanding up to northern Iowa and from central Kansas and Nebraska to western Ohio, is perfectly situated for the formation of supercell thunderstorms producing EF-2 scale tornadoes and above (USDC, n.d.). There has been an increase in populations in tornado-prone areas, yet a consistent decline in tornado deaths since 1925 most likely due to improved forecasting and warning systems (USDC, 2011). Nevertheless, super-violent tornadoes are still documented, and the physical damage and loss of life can be extensive.

On May 22, 2011, a catastrophic tornado that hit Joplin, Missouri, became the most recent addition to the Ten Deadliest Documented Tornado Events, ranking at number seven in United States history injuring more than 1000 and killing 158 people (USDC, n.d.). The multi-vortex EF-5 tornado left a 13-mile path, a mile wide, destroying one-third of the city, damaging or destroying half of the school district, and taking the lives of seven Joplin School District students and one staff member (Joplin Schools,
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

2015b). With more than 4,200 students without a school to attend, the calendar year for Joplin Schools ended that day, 10 school days earlier than scheduled. Yet, just as the superintendent envisioned, on August 17, 2011, the school district reopened, with the majority of the students attending temporary facilities designed and created in only 87 days.

Although crises are not unexpected, they can be unpredictable, challenging organizations to be crisis-ready (Coombs, 2012). Crises, such as natural disasters, are particularly difficult to manage since they often affect the infrastructure required to sustain an educational system. Additionally, educational institutions in crisis experience unique challenges unlike other organizations in that crises within an educational setting directly impact their ability to meet the needs of their primary stakeholders whom they serve (a) students, (b) families, and (c) communities (Whitla, 2003). The catastrophic events of May 22, 2011, in Joplin, Missouri, challenged the school district’s leadership to design and to build temporary facilities in less than three months in order to reopen the school district by the 2011-2012 academic school year, on time, increasing the district’s opportunity to meet the needs of stakeholders.

Statement of the Problem

While there are a significant amount of studies related to crisis management, literature addressing examples of crises in the context of public schools and their communities is limited (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008; Nicolai, 2008; Smith & Riley, 2012). The nature of modern crises comes with increased complexity requiring a better understanding of command leadership during a crisis (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008). Mitroff (2001) posited that crises both large and small are a daily occurrence, and while
candidly addresses the challenges she faced during the Joplin tornado crisis. Whitla emphasizes the importance of preparation and planning in crisis management, which are critical factors in ensuring a successful recovery. The Joplin School District’s recovery exemplifies the importance of leadership in crisis situations. By analyzing Whitla’s actions during the crisis, educators and leaders in the public school setting can learn valuable lessons for preparing and responding to future crises. This perspective not only enhances crisis management strategies but also underscores the significant role schools play in fostering community resilience and recovery.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

(2008) provides a window through which to view the leadership’s response to a catastrophic event involving a school district and its surrounding community.

Purpose of Study

Organizations around the world are wrought with crisis situations; public educational institutions are no exception. Although there is a substantial amount of research pertaining to crisis response in for-profit institutions, research is limited in not-for-profit, public educational institutions in crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). Such events can have a traumatic effect on the school community, directly or indirectly affecting students, teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders (Whitla, 2003); and, according to Whitla, an educational institution’s response can minimize the impact of such a crisis.

The purpose of this study was to conduct inquiry into the administrative approach during the crisis situation at Joplin Public Schools. This particular study focused primarily on the leadership response to the events, emotions, and consequences associated with the crisis through the multiframe perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) in order to create a better understanding of how decisions were made to minimize personal and organizational harm within the school community (Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003). This study analyzed the decisions made through the structural, political, human resource, and symbolic frames in order to find clarity and meaning of the decisions made by the administration. The findings identified several lessons learned that may be used to guide other non-profit, public educational institutions in a future crisis event (Coombs, 2010).
LESIONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the study emerged from the literature. This study sought to answer these questions:

1. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the structural frame?
2. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the human resource frame?
3. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the symbolic frame?
4. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the political frame?

Framework

The study used the four-frame perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) in order to organize the study. Bolman and Deal (2008) proposed this multiframe orientation as a means for leaders and organizations to understand organizational life. Weick (1995), in his discussion of sensemaking within organizations, claimed that people place items into frameworks in order to understand, construct meaning, and obtain a mutual understanding of an event. Weick (1995) added that human situations, when put into a framework, are progressively clarified. Management literature supports a multi-frame approach to explain organizations and their performance (Heimovics, Herman, & Jurkiewicz, 1993). Bolman and Deal (2008) claim that organizations using multiple frames will address problems more effectively.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Multiframe thinking requires moving beyond a narrow perspective of how to handle an issue, and provides an opportunity to capture more than one aspect of organizational life (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The four frames, identified as structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, offer this multiframe perspective. Bolman and Deal (1992) discussed the dangers of constricting models limited to one frame:

In its own way, each framework (structural, human resource, or political) champions a bounded rationality. Structural views stress the deterministic forces of goals and technologies. The human resource framework calls attention to enduring human needs and motives. Political views emphasize the inescapable forces of scarce resources and intransigent interests. Each of those perspectives is valid and important; we ignore any of them at our peril. (pp. 43-44)

They noted the frameworks are powerful, memorable tools that may help people realize factors they may have overlooked and develop an awareness of the scope of a crisis situation. Additionally, this process of reframing provides an opportunity for one to “see new possibilities and become more versatile and effective in their responses” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 5).

Bolman and Deal (2008) analogize their multiframe perspective to the work of Galileo, citing that “each lens he [Galileo] added contributed to a more accurate image of the heavens” (p. 18). The model, according to Bolman and Deal, is a useful way to conceptualize the thinking and action of leaders during an ambiguous time, providing a more “holistic picture” (p. 326) of a complex event. According to Goldman and Smith (1991), the model is especially appropriate for understanding schools considering the explicit human resource orientation involved in an educational institution, the extensive meanings associated with educational issues, the intensity of external environmental influences, and the blanket of bureaucracy built within the educational system. Therefore,
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

in order to promote a better understanding of the organization’s response to a crisis, this reframing model seemed most appropriate.

Design of Proposed Study

In order to understand the impact of leadership during a crisis through the various frameworks proposed by Bolman and Deal (2008), qualitative research methodology was used. Merriam (2009) recommended qualitative research as a preferred method for the applied social science field in that “practitioners in these fields deal with the everyday concerns of people’s lives” (p. 1) with the goal of learning more about and improving a practice. This type of research is explicitly designed as a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4), and focuses on “discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Since the purpose of the study was to understand and create meaning from the leadership employed during and immediately after a crisis, a qualitative research design was chosen.

Merriam (2009) proposed an analytical process that is “emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions” (p. 16) when conducting qualitative research. She recommended several additional competencies to support the nature of qualitative research such as (a) a questioning stance, (b) tolerance for ambiguity, (c) careful observation, (d) good questioning, (e) inductive thinking, and (f) strong writing skills. Since the study was designed to explore the leadership response to a crisis, a case study strategy with an interpretive approach was used (Creswell, 2009). This philosophical perspective seemed most appropriate in that there is no “single, observable reality” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8), yet there are “multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single
event” (p. 8). This type of study allowed the participants and researcher to construct meaning, through interactions, during the research process to create a broader understanding of the event.

**Site of the Study**

This study focused on one public school district that experienced a major crisis that directly affected its students, staff, community, and stakeholders. The district is located in southwest Missouri and serves more than 7,400 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. It is committed to providing a high-quality education and believes excellence is achieved through maintaining high expectations, continuously improving as an educational institution, and being accountable to state and national standards (Joplin Schools, 2013). Although tornado activity is not uncommon in this region, this particular school district had not previously been directly impacted by an event of this magnitude.

**Participants of the Study**

The participants were purposefully selected. Creswell (2009) recommended this type of selection when attempting to understand an event that takes places in a particular setting. They included various leaders and employees of the organization at the time of the crisis: (a) the superintendent, (b) the assistant superintendent, (c) the president of the school board, (d) the director of secondary administration, (e) the director of special services, (f) three principals that suffered both student and building loss, and (g) three teachers that lost both their home and their building in which they worked. Of the targeted participants, the president of the school board did not respond to the request, and one of the employees who suffered both personal and professional loss chose not to
participate. Therefore, the researcher interviewed an additional principal who lost an employee. The individual interviews ranged from 48 minutes to 75 minutes.

**Data Collection Tools**

This study used multiple sources of information for data collection. According to Merriam (2009), a qualitative case study is an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40), and can be characterized as “particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (p. 43) requiring the “complete, literal description of the incident” (p. 43) to “illuminate our understanding” (p. 44). Therefore, the primary sources of data collection were (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (b) direct observations post facto; and (c) document analysis (Patton, 2002).

**Interviews.** For participants employed with Joplin Schools, consent from the current superintendent on behalf of the school district was obtained (see Appendix A) before requesting individual interviews. Upon approval from the district, and for those participants not currently employed with the school district, individual participant consent was obtained (see Appendix B). These in-depth interviews provided data related to the “experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 4) of leadership personnel during and immediately after the crisis. Merriam (2009) posited that interviewing is the “best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (p. 88). Each interview was conducted individually and digitally recorded with the participant’s knowledge and consent. A semi-structured interview process, which will included open-ended questions related to the leaders’ roles during the crisis, their perceptions of personal and institutional crisis readiness and response, and their most meaningful experience during the event, was used throughout the study (see
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Appendix C). This type of interview protocol provided flexibility and the opportunity to explore differing perspectives as related to the crisis. Merriam (2009) recommended this type of interview as an appropriate format when the researcher knows enough about the phenomenon to guide general questioning, yet the researcher would like the opportunity to follow up on emerging worldviews of the respondents.

**Observations.** The researcher anticipated observing leadership meetings, board meetings, and press conferences post facto via audiovisual recordings in order to gather data related to interpersonal interactions and organizational processes to inform the study. However, due to damage to the district’s video equipment, only publicly recorded press conferences and personal interviews were available for viewing. According to Merriam (2009), observations are an appropriate data collection method because they provide an opportunity to observe the “phenomenon of interest” (p. 117) as it occurs naturally, and it “represents a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon” (p. 117). Patton (2002) stated, “observation of a phenomenon of interest may be the best research method” (p. 21) allowing the researcher to understand the complexity of an event. The study used an observation guide (see Appendix D), as recommended by Creswell (2009), which provided a consistent, organized format in which to record information from the recordings available.

**Document analysis.** Merriam (2009) proposed the term *document* as an overarching term to include “written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 139). Therefore, a document analysis guide (see Appendix E), as recommended by Creswell (2009), was utilized to analyze the language, words, and actions of the participants during and immediately after the crisis. The study anticipated
the use of board minutes as part of the document analysis process, but these were not available. However, meeting notes, official publications, reports, and newspaper accounts provided substantial information that furthered the understanding of the phenomenon of interest while creating clarity and meaning of the communication between the leaders and the educational institution’s stakeholders.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection and analysis is designed to be recursive and dynamic, necessitating unique steps throughout the analytical process (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The very nature of qualitative research requires an inductive approach “working back and forth between the themes and the database” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). Therefore, a multi-level, interactive approach involving continual reflection and analytical questioning was used in order to analyze the data (Creswell, 2009). The data included field notes, transcripts, and multiple notations of documents. The qualitative data was read to “obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on the overall meaning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). This preliminary step was followed by an open-coding process to identify common themes (Merriam, 2009). Next, analytical coding, in which words were highlighted within the previously open-coded data, was used in order to identify similarities and differences. This allowed themes to emerge enabling the generation of a few conceptual ideas (Merriam, 2009). The final process was to identify how each data piece fell within the four frames of the Bolman and Deal (2008) model.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on one academic institution: Joplin Public Schools. The case study centered on developing an understanding of the leadership’s response to a
particular event. According to Merriam (2009), the descriptive and heuristic characteristics of case studies are an acceptable means for understanding a situation, event, program, or phenomenon. However, their particularistic nature limits the generalizability of the study to other institutions and administrators.

Merriam (2009) stated the purpose of qualitative research is to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5), which is highly dependent upon the participants’ interpretations of an event or phenomenon. Likewise, researchers are also dependent upon their own interpretations of the data in order to develop pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell (2009), researchers “recognize their own backgrounds shape their interpretation” (p. 8) of the data. Therefore, in reference to research methodology, this study exhibited the same limitations as other qualitative studies in that it is highly contextual and based upon the interpretations of humans (Merriam, 2009).

**Significance of the Study**

The stories in the aftermath of a devastating tornado highlighted the need for further research. Investigation into how one school district handled a crisis situation provides other educational leaders an opportunity to assess their own crisis management plans in a public school setting. This study narrowed the focus of the investigation to the behaviors of leadership, within the framework of Bolman and Deal (2008), exhibited during and immediately after the crisis, a critical time in which the followers looked to the leaders for guidance and support. The findings provide other leaders more
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

information regarding the types of decisions and pressures organizations face during a critical time, allowing them to be better prepared for crises.

Crises in educational institutions are becoming more common (Whitla, 2003). Educational institutions often serve an integral part in a family and a community. When crises hit, it is often the return to school that provides that sense of normalcy and ability to move forward (Smith & Riley, 2012). According to Whitla (2003), an educational institution’s response to the crisis “will determine both the medium and longer psychological impact of the situation on members of the school community” (p. 1); therefore, this places significant pressure on the institution to respond appropriately to various crisis situations that might arise. This research was significant because it provided an opportunity to reflect upon the actions and behaviors of leaders who attempted to respond to the needs of teachers, students, families, and community members during a difficult time, and thus begin the recovery process. The combination of insights gained from the study may be useful to other school leaders who may experience such a time and may need to reevaluate or develop new systems for responding to a crisis in their institution. Smith and Riley (2012) posited that reflection is a key component of school-based crisis management in that it allows institutions to learn from what has happened and be better prepared to respond more effectively to what may happen in the future. Supporting this perspective, Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) claimed a need for further research related to analyzing and understanding the processes involved in a crisis situation and the unique challenges these processes pose for leaders, therefore promoting a better prepared organization.
The results of this study created a greater understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of leaders throughout the decision-making process resulting in better prepared systems, which could improve others’ institutional responses to crises. The study identified effective strategies that could be used to inform educational practices concerning crisis management, therefore adding to the growing body of research pertaining to educational institutions enduring crises. Smith and Riley (2012) suggested using real-life scenarios, such as those found in Whitla’s (2003) book on crisis management in the school community, as an effective way to create contingency plans for future crisis events. Smith and Riley (2010) noted in previous research that it is much easier to adapt a current contingency plan than to create a new plan in times of severe crises. Therefore, the findings from this study provide the opportunity for other leaders to learn from one educational institution’s past experience in order to improve their own crisis management plans.

Last, this study attempted to expand existing research related to the use of Bolman and Deal’s (2003, 2008) organizational framework within educational organizations by focusing on the leadership employed during a crisis in a public educational institution. Smith and Riley (2012) stated:

Leading the recovery of a school community after a crisis, therefore, involves a delicate balancing act that requires sensitivity to the needs of those impacted by the crisis, the need to return as quickly as possible to standard operating routines in the eyes of staff, students, parents and the community, and the need to assimilate the operational impact of the crisis. (p. 64)

Using the multiframe perspective of Bolman and Deal (2003, 2008) illuminated where the majority of decisions were made, which of the frames or combinations of frames leaders most often used to make their decisions, and the decisions leaders made that
under normal circumstances they might not have had the power to make (Rice & Harris, 2003). According to Rice and Harris (2003), this insight will add to the literature by highlighting the frames most commonly used, while identifying which frames may have been neglected so as to guide leaders of educational institutions in creating a crisis plan that is delicately balanced to address the needs of its school community.

**Summary**

Although crises are not unexpected, they can be unpredictable, challenging organizations to be crisis-ready (Coombs, 2012). Crises, such as natural disasters, are particularly difficult to manage since they often affect the infrastructure required to sustain an educational system. Additionally, educational institutions in crisis experience unique challenges unlike other organizations in that crises within an educational setting directly impact their ability to meet the needs of their primary stakeholders whom they serve (a) students, (b) families, and (c) communities (Whitla, 2003). The catastrophic events of May 22, 2011, in Joplin, Missouri, challenged the school district’s leadership to design and to build temporary facilities in less than three months in order to reopen the school district by the 2011-2012 academic school year; thereby, providing an opportunity for the return to a somewhat ‘normal’ status. Studying this unique event allowed the opportunity for reflection and learning. According to Smith and Riley (2012), reflection is a key component of school-based crisis management in that it allows institutions to learn from what has happened and to be better prepared to respond more effectively to what may happen in the future.

While there is a significant amount of studies relating to crisis management in for-profit organizations, research is scant in the context of crisis management in not-for-
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

profit, educational institutions, particularly kindergarten through 12th grade public schools (Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). This qualitative study, encompassing in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, added to the research by analyzing the district’s response to such a complex crisis, using the multi-lens framework of Bolman and Deal (2008), in order to provide clarity and meaning of the response during and immediately after a crisis. According to Coombs (2010), the analysis of a crisis response offers lessons learned that have the potential to mitigate or prepare other educational institutions in future crises events. Therefore, the information gained from this study provides the opportunity for other public educational institutions in becoming crisis-ready.
CHAPTER TWO

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT FOR STUDY
Introduction to Leadership and Organizational Context

Public school administrators continue to face an unprecedented number of crises challenging the safety, security, and sustainability of educational institutions in today’s society. Societies are becoming more vulnerable to “relatively small disturbances” (Boin, 2009, p. 369) and these small disturbances seem to “propagate rapidly through the dense networks that connect them” (p. 370). Crises have “different causes, play out differently, draw different reactions, and affect societies in different ways” (Boin, 2009, p. 367), increasing the difficulty in crisis preparation and contingency planning.

The structure of the public educational system continues to exhibit hierarchical decision-making based on distribution of power and responsibility with a strong adherence to rules and protocols, diminishing the value of innovative thought and action (Smith & Riley, 2012). Due to the deep bureaucratic structure, the system is predisposed to adopt a linear approach to management (Smith & Riley, 2012). However, according to Smith and Riley, a response to crises requires a more democratic approach so that “responsibility for effort can appropriately reside with those best placed to effect rapid resolution of the crisis” (p. 67), promoting a change from “linear thinking to systems thinking, and from conventional wisdom to flexible decision making” (p. 67). Furthermore, administrator certification programs rarely provide the education and training needed to manage school crises, much less to manage a catastrophic crisis that involves natural disasters (Lichtenstein, Schonfeld, & Kline, 1994). These catastrophic events may be relatively rare, but they are often the most significant challenge a public leader will face (Boin, 2009), and while crisis prevention is impossible, preventing subsequent crises that evolve from the original crisis is possible. Thus, a thorough
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

understanding of an institution’s organizational context and leadership is essential to
frame inquiry into an organization and leadership’s response to a catastrophic crisis. This
discussion explores organizational theory and leadership within the context of the public
school system through the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic
frameworks.

Organizational and Leadership Theory within the Public School Setting

Educational institutions are critically different from other organizations due to
their client-serving status. Public school systems, hospitals, and welfare agencies,
colleges and universities are people-processing institutions in which:

Society feeds clients with specific needs into the institution and the
institution acts upon them and then returns them to society. This is an
extremely important fact, for the clients demand and often obtain a
significant amount of influence of the decision-making processes of the
institution. Even powerless clients such as small schoolchildren usually
have protectors such as parents who demand a voice in the operation of
the organization. (Baldridge, 1983, p. 40)

Public school systems are under immense pressure to mimic the business world
especially in the areas of finance and operational strategies; however, due to the unique
nature of educational institutions, Gainey (2009) recommended caution.

Leadership can be classified in a multitude of ways from a personality
perspective, an act or behavior, a power relationship between leaders and followers, as a
transformational process, and/or from a skills perspective with all viewpoints stressing
capabilities as to what makes effective leadership. However, for the purposes of this
paper, the definition provided by Northouse (2013) will be used that says, “leadership is a
process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common
goal” (p. 5) which encompasses processes, followers, influence, and common goals.
The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Structural Perspective

The modern American public educational system dates back to the early 19th century in which individuals, towns and families assumed the costs associated with operating whatever schools they had, resulting in locally-controlled education (Finn, 2011). By the mid-19th century, various states began to require children to attend school, and by 1918, every state had some type of compulsory attendance, thus prompting government financing and control over education. However, Finn posited that the most significant impact on school-governance structure was during the Progressive Era, when the prevailing thought was to keep politics out of education and entrust the local public educational system to “expert professionals and independent, non-partisan boards” (p. 131), hence the board of education was created.

The state-level structure of education followed the same pattern creating its own board of education as a means to buffer “conventional politics” (Finn, 2011, p. 132). States hired commissioners or superintendents, and state constitutions were rewritten with provisions explicitly assigning states the responsibility to educate their citizens. The board of education varies dramatically among districts and states, each with its own characteristics of a bureaucratic system whereas (a) regular activities are distributed in a fixed way as official duties, (b) authority to give commands is strictly delimited by rules, and (c) only persons maintaining the regulated qualifications are employed (Weber, 1973/2005). Thus, modern-day public education consists of each state overseeing multiple local education agencies (LEAs) with each LEA having its own superintendent and board of education with a typical public-sector bureaucratic system (Finn, 2011).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

From a structural perspective, the bureaucratic nature of the public school setting predisposes an educational institution to a skills approach to leadership whereas only those maintaining the qualifications will be considered for a leadership position. The skills approach, based on the research of R. L. Katz, identified three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual (Northouse, 2013). Clearly, in a public school setting, these would be highly important aspects to lead since (a) knowledge and proficiency in a specific area is required; (b) the ability to work with teachers, students, and families is obligatory; and (c) articulation and expression of a school’s vision and direction is essential. The most beneficial aspect of this type of leadership is that these skills can be developed, and, as with most leadership positions, one does not walk in the door with the ability to exhibit all three skills with an equal level of performance, thus providing leaders the opportunities to develop their skills through their professional experiences (Northouse, 2013).

The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Human Resource Perspective

Although the foundation of education began primarily as a bureaucratic system, the interactions between people and the organization provide a platform for human resource theories in order to understand public education. Under the human resource theory, the organization has the power to influence human behavior; likewise employee behavior shapes an organization (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2005). One of the main influences of organizational behavior began with the work of Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne experiments, drawing attention to the human component in organizations by claiming that in order to survive, organizations need a “new understanding of human
motivation and behavior in business organizations” (Shafritz et al., 2005, p. 166). In the late 50s, McGregor (1957/2005), after delivering his speech entitled The Human Side of Enterprise, wrote some of the most influential work concerning organizational theory and behavior stating that “past conceptions of the nature of man are inadequate and, in many ways, incorrect. We are becoming quite certain that, under proper conditions, unimagined resources of creative human energy could become available within the organizational setting” (p. 179).

Leadership as a process indicates that there is a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers (Northouse, 2013). Under the human resource aspect of leadership, people and organizations need each other; when the fit is good between both parties, individuals find the work meaningful and satisfying and the organization gains the benefits of the talent and energy it needs to succeed (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The importance of building relationships between staff and leaders is essential, since it is much easier to bring along followers when they understand and see value in where a leader is trying to take them (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

An important aspect in the educational setting is to make sure that people’s needs are being met. Bolman and Deal (2008) discussed Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and noted that at the top of the hierarchy is self-actualization. Since the majority of staff in an educational institution are in the frontlines of meeting the needs of students, it is imperative to meet the most basic needs of staff. This allows staff to reach that point of self-actualization increasing their ability to meet the needs of others (Bolman & Deal, 2008).
The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Political Perspective

The multi-tiered public educational system creates a variety of areas in which political influence affects the organization not only at the local and state level, but increasingly more prevalent at the federal level. Elected officials are often influenced or advised by special interests groups, philanthropic groups, and corporations wanting to put their name on educational monies by selling their newest product, professional training, or ideas. Due to the bureaucratic structure of the public educational system, much of the power lies in the hands of those with the legitimate authority, in other words, the authority that flows down through the organizational hierarchy (Shafritz et al., 2005). However, there are other forms of power that prevail over authority-based power. Shafritz et al. presented the idea that participants in an organization have the potential to be an influencer if they have some basis for power, are willing to exert substantial effort, and possess some level of political skill to be influential. Mintzberg (1983/2005) theorized that an organization’s behavior is based on the actions of the players, called influencers, and the influencers attempt to control the organization. He claimed to clearly understand the “behavior of the organization, it is necessary to understand which influencers are present, what needs each seeks to fulfill in the organization, and how each is able to exercise power to fulfill them” (p. 334).

Educational institutions are “complex systems of individuals and coalitions each having their own interests, beliefs, values, preferences, perspectives, and perceptions” (Shafritz et al., 2005, p. 283) where each are competing for scarce organizational
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

resources. Baldridge (1983) stated, “all complex organizations can be studied as miniature political systems” (p. 50). He noted that the politics begin in policy formation with special interests groups using their influence. In education, according to Baldridge, these policies are the driving force behind an organization’s course of action and become a vital focus of special interest group activity.

From a political perspective, leadership involves influence, and according to Northouse (2013), “without influence leadership does not exist” (p. 5). Likewise, the capacity or potential to influence is power. There exist two major types of power: position power in which the power is derived from a particular office in the organizational system, and personal power in which power is derived from the leader being seen as likeable and knowledgeable (Northouse, 2013). Both types of power are evident in educational leadership.

Leadership also occurs in groups, and is the context in which leadership happens (Northouse, 2013). According to Northouse, leadership involves influencing a group that has a common purpose, which in the educational setting could include staff, students, parents, the community, or special interests groups. With scarce resources at the forefront of most educational institutions, some leaders may resort to coercion; however, coercion is not considered leadership since it runs counter to “working with followers to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p. 11) with the intent to only serve a personal interest goal of the leader.
The Organizational and Leadership Context of the Public Educational Setting from a Symbolic Perspective

The historical hierarchal structure of the educational institution with its rigidity, homogeneity, authority based on power, and reliance or rules and regulations have challenged the educational system to make effective change that reflects the diverse culture and values of our world today (Shafritz et al., 2005). According Shafritz et al., the command and control culture must be replaced with a culture that encourages diversity, individual empowerment, and employee participation.

Senge (1990/2005) proposed a shift in thinking, “from seeing parts to wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future” (p. 441). He believed systems thinking to be the cornerstone of “how learning organizations think about their world” (p. 442). However, for the educational system bound in such a bureaucratic structure, system thinking requires a shift from the commonplace linear thinking to seeing interrelationships and process of change instead of snapshots. Senge claimed systems thinking forfeits the idea of a “simple locus of responsibility” (p. 444) so that everyone shares the responsibility for problems. He stated, “symbolic perspectives challenge traditional views that building a team is mainly a problem of finding the right people, designing an appropriate structure, or negotiating political agreements; the essence for high performance is spirit” (p. 290). Organizations develop distinctive beliefs, values, and customs, and those who understand this have the power to shape a cohesive and effective organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

From a symbolic perspective, leadership involves the pursuit of a common goal, in other words, the leader and the followers have mutual purpose (Northouse, 2013). For a leader, attempting to achieve something together lessens the opportunity to act unethically toward followers (Northouse, 2013), and provides the glue that bonds the organization, unites people, and leads the organization to the desired end (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In an organization, “myth, vision, and values imbue an organization with purpose and resolve” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 254). For most educational institutions, the organizations mission statement and vision provides the direction. Additionally, there is often one symbol that binds the organization together—the school mascot. For most educational institutions, the mascot is a symbol that reflects the common purpose of the school often being boldly displayed at athletic, academic, and performing arts events symbolically drawing the organization together as one team.

Organizational and Leadership Context of Joplin Schools

Joplin School District is located in southwest Missouri in the city of Joplin. It is the largest community within a 90-mile radius, and located just off of Interstate 44 and the historic Route 66, making it a frequent stop for travelers and surrounding community members. The population within a 40-mile radius of Joplin is 400,000, making it Missouri’s fourth largest metropolitan area (Fact Sheet for City, n.d.). Joplin was founded in 1873 and expanded significantly due to the wealth created by the mining of zinc; however, growth later faltered during the World War II era when mineral prices collapsed (History of Joplin, n.d.).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

In 2010, the year prior to the Joplin tornado crisis, the United States Census Bureau (USCB, n.d.) reported a total population of 50,150. The population demographics were reported as follows: 87.6% White, 4.5% Hispanic, 3.3% Black, 1.8% American Indian, 1.6% Asian, and 0.3% Pacific Islander with the remaining percentage not reported. The census also reported that while 85.9% of the population had their high school diploma or equivalency, only 22.4% held a bachelor’s degree or higher (USCB, n.d.). Home ownership included 56.4%, with a median value of $99,600, and 21.4% of the population reported living in multi-unit housing structures (USCB, n.d.). From 2009-2013, the median income was $37,912 (USCB, n.d.).

The Joplin School District, in 2010, served 7,543 students preschool through twelfth grade encompassing 60 miles of district boundaries (Joplin Schools, 2010). The district, with a historical emphasis on a neighborhood-school philosophy, was composed of thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school, technical school, and an early childhood center. Over 54 percent of the student population participated in the free and reduced lunch program (Joplin Schools, 2010). Approximately 90% of graduates reported having a positive learning experience, and the teacher retention rate for the year was 89.4% (Joplin Schools, 2010).

Community support and engagement was considered moderate to strong with minimal competition in board campaigning and increased voter satisfaction over the past several years. The district had achieved accreditation of Distinction for Performance for the last six of the seven years, an award based on state-standardized test performance (Joplin Schools, 2010). The district was committed to moving the district forward. Over the past several years, the district had developed and implemented a comprehensive
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

instructional technology plan, and provided extensive technology training to teachers. The district had also created a strategic planning team comprised of community members and educators who were meeting regularly to propose the next phase in the long-range planning process, which included a 58 million dollar initiative to build safe rooms, and renovate the high school and Franklin Technology Center to create a 21st Century learning environment in order to meet the demands of increasingly complex and information-rich society (Joplin Schools, 2010)

Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Structural Perspective

The Joplin Schools Board of Education (BOE) is an all-elected seven-member council. Each member serves a three-year term with a systematic rotation of replacement through an annual election with no more than three members being replaced at any one time. The board hires one employee, the superintendent, extending a contract offer of three years. The superintendent of Joplin Schools directly oversees the Chief Operating Officer whose primary task is to oversee the Human Resources Department, the assistant superintendent whose primary task is to oversee curriculum, and the Chief Financial Officer.

Previous to the crisis, the board was well connected in the community, and the elected members reflected the diversity in industry similar to the community. The board members represented the following professions: (a) manufacturing, (b) construction, (c) healthcare, (d) executive professionals, (e) education and administration, (f) and philanthropy. Additionally, five of the members had, or previously had, children in the Joplin Schools system. Due to the diversity of the group, the board of education as a
whole had a wide circle of influence, and it seemed there was always someone to consult concerning any type of issue.

Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Human Resource Perspective

Teacher support and engagement toward district initiatives was characterized as supportive. According to the board policy concerning the district’s mission, members of both professional and support staff were asked to participate in developing policies, rules and procedures (Joplin Schools, 2015a). Staff involvement in establishing district goals and objectives, budgets and curriculum was expected.

The BOE of Joplin Schools recognized the relationship between high-quality professional development and student achievement, and was committed to provide teachers with training that was aligned with the district’s Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). This included funding allocation for professional development and increased compensation or advancement with additional educational training in accordance with board policies related to staff involvement in decision-making (Joplin Schools, 2015a). The professional development was designed to support the collective learning of teachers and support the learning of new teachers to the district.

Staff opening days were an integral part of the professional development providing an opportunity for both certified and non-certified staff to come together as a whole to hear the vision and mission directly from the superintendent. Teachers were recognized for their commitment and performance in the district. Additionally, administrative staff delivered small gifts of appreciation, biannually, to each building for distribution to the teachers.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Political Perspective

As with most school districts across the United States, in 2010, Joplin Schools was bracing for the effects of federal educational initiatives and financial challenges sure to affect the local public school system. Just three years prior, the Joplin School District had been successful in passing a 57.3 million dollar bond to renovate two facilities, a middle school and special services facility, and construct two new middle schools. However, just as the 2007 bond initiatives were being completed in late 2009, the effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis began to impact public educational funding. Additionally, in the summer of 2009, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan announced the Race to the Top initiative, a competitive grant program awarding funds based on state and school performance. As part of the initiative, states were awarded extra points if they adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by the fall of 2010 (United States Department of Education, 2009). Thus, in the summer of 2010, the state of Missouri adopted the CCSS, and districts continued to feel the financial stress caused by drastic revisions and changes to educational policies and curriculum required in their district. The district had prepared for the impact of the financial crisis and reduced state funding, but understood it would be lean times for the district. The certainty of the future bond proposal being supported by the community was questionable due to the anti-tax sentiment, effects of economic disaster, and the controversy over adoption of the CCSS.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Organizational Context of Joplin Schools from a Symbolic and Cultural Perspective

*Joplin Schools: Investing in the Future Today by Inspiring our Students to Pursue Excellence*

The above mission statement of Joplin Schools in 2010 reflected the fundamental beliefs of the district concerning teaching and learning. The Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP), based on the mission statement, served as a foundation for allocation of resources, policy development, and implementation of instructional programs (Joplin Schools, 2011). The district desired to achieve this plan through improving and providing diversified learning opportunities, focusing on staff quality and retention, and celebrating success (Joplin Schools, 2011).

The theme for the year 2010 was Futures in Motion, a reflection of the district’s desire to move forward in its technology leadership role and provide students with classrooms integrated with technology. The Joplin Schools’ mascot is an eagle, and the emblem could be seen across the district on buildings, in classrooms, and clothing worn by the students, teachers and staff. Additionally, in order to address an increase in students living in poverty, an area-wide initiative began called Joplin Bright Futures: Connections for Success. This organization, created as a partnership between the school district, parents, and the business community, increased awareness about children living in poverty and provided a means to meet basic needs of children in the district (Joplin Schools, 2011). Although still in its beginning phases, the community support joined in quickly with each building being supported by one faith-based partner and one business partner with promise of bringing unity to the community.
Leadership Context of Joplin Schools

The superintendent of Joplin Schools is the chief executive officer of the Board of Education, and the administrative head of all divisions and departments of the district (Joplin Schools, 2015a). The superintendent is considered the representative of the Board and is responsible for executing policies, rules and procedures issued by the Board as well as communicating all directives from the Board to its employees or students. According to the Board policies, the superintendent may give directives, which will be considered valid until disapproved by the Board, for the management of issues not covered in the Board policies, rules and procedures (Joplin Schools, 2015a). The superintendent is held accountable to the Board, and all decisions made by the Board concerning internal operations of the school district are delegated to the superintendent. Thus, he is responsible for the delegation of responsibility and authority for the operation of various functions of the school (Joplin Schools, 2015a).

The former superintendent identified his style of leadership as the situational approach. As the name implies, this approach focuses on leadership in situations and requires a leader to adapt his or her style to the particular situation (Northouse, 2013). It is composed of both a directive and supportive dimension, and requires a leader to evaluate the needs of the subordinates to determine the appropriate approach.

The situational approach was developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard and based on Bill Reddin’s 3-D management style theory (Northouse, 2013). The most recent model, Situational Leadership II is an extension of the original leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard and is best understood if separated into two parts: leadership style and development level of subordinates (Northouse, 2013). The
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

leadership style can be classified into four distinct categories: style one (S1) the directing approach, high directive—low supportive; style two (S2) the coaching approach, high directive—high supportive; style three (S3) the supporting approach, high supportive—low directive; and, style four (S4) the delegating approach, low supportive—low directive (Northouse, 2013).

According to the superintendent of Joplin Schools, when addressing normal school-related business, he operated primarily in the categories of S3 and S4, supporting and delegating roles; styles that seemed to fit his nature and personality. However, when confronted with a crisis, he noted a significant need to operate outside the supportive and delegating approach toward a more coaching and directive style of leadership, which at times became quite challenging.

Summary

Public school administrators continue to face an unprecedented number of crises challenging the ability to meet the needs of their stakeholders. Likewise, the bureaucratic nature of the public educational system predisposes educational institutions to respond in a linear manner further limiting the organization’s ability to respond to crises in an effective manner (Smith & Riley, 2012). Thus, understanding an institution’s organizational and leadership context, on both a universal and local level, is essential to frame inquiry into a particular organization’s response to a catastrophic crisis.
CHAPTER THREE

SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Introduction

From school shootings to natural disasters, the educational community has come to realize that crises have no boundaries, impacting the ability of school districts to safeguard their students, employees, and other stakeholders (Gainey, 2009). According to Coombs (2012), crises are “unpredictable, but not unexpected” (p. 3); no organization can adequately prepare for every possible event, yet wise organizations should anticipate crises to befall them. Shoenberg (2005) posited that although planning is important, leadership during and immediately after a crisis plays a significant role in the outcome of the event. While there is adequate literature relating to crisis leadership and management in the corporate world, there exists a lack of literature concerning the role of leadership during and after a crisis in educational institutions, specifically in the public school system (Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003). For this dissertation, the conceptual framework of Bolman and Deal (2008) will be used to examine how a public school district’s leadership responded after a crisis. This pluralistic model will provide a basis for analyzing the events during and after the crisis through the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frame. The goal is to use existing literature and the data gained from this study to provide practitioners the information they need to better prepare for the unpredictable.

This literature review will present crisis definitions and characteristics, as well as the positive and negative impacts that crises may have on organizations. The researcher will examine several aspects of educational institutions in crises and identify measures organizations can take to protect their stakeholders’ and students’ interests. A brief overview of natural disasters and an outline of the specific challenges facing educational
institutions in crisis will also be provided. Next, a focus on crisis leadership, which will include a thorough examination of the leadership roles and communication during a crisis emphasizing the need for crisis leadership to be integrated throughout the organizational system, will be presented. Finally, a discussion of the four frames or multi-frame approach posited by Bolman and Deal (2008) will be presented in order to provide a foundation to guide the research study.

**Crises**

Crises are no longer rare or random events; yet they are inevitable, natural features prominent in today’s society with the rate of events increasing at a dramatic pace (Mitroff, 2001, 2005). No longer is the question of whether a major crisis will impact an organization, according to Mitroff and Pearson (1993); the only real question is how, when, and which type. No organization is exempt, “it can happen to any company, large or small, public or private” (Fink, 2002, p. 1), and as the author clearly articulated, leaders and organizations should recognize that it is safest to assume that “a crisis looms on the horizon” (p. 1). Several researchers claim that crises seem to be woven into the very fabric of today’s society (Fink, 2002; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993), making the headlines as a result of the dramatic impact these events have domestically or internationally, locally, or organizationally (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997).

**Definition of Crisis**

Defining the term crisis is as difficult as predicting when, how, and why a crisis will occur (Mitroff, 2001). According to Coombs and Holladay (2010), “a crisis is perceptual” (p. 2). In other words, if the stakeholders believe it is a crisis, then it is a crisis (Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). A crisis is unpredictable, but not
unexpected, strikes suddenly, violates the stakeholders’ expectations with potential to create undesirable outcomes, and requires the careful attention of management (Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Fink (2002) defined a crisis as a turning point, with a certain degree of risk and uncertainty, while Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2011) claimed crises are “unique moments in the history of organizations” (p. 5) with the potential for positive and negative outcomes. Terms that describe a crisis are somewhat limitless, and to create a definition that includes all of the above-related terms would be futile. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the definition of a crisis provided by Hermann (1963) will be used; a crisis as an event that “(1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization” (p. 64).

**Characteristics of Crisis**

Crises are different from incidents, according to Coombs and Holladay (2010), and the term should be reserved for serious events that affect an organization. They are anomalies, not because one thinks they will never happen such as a natural disaster or a plane crash, but because they are events outside of what a stakeholder expects to happen (Coombs & Holladay). Whether a crisis is a natural disaster or man-made, it involves a threat to an organization and/or its stakeholders, requires a response, and was unanticipated to some extent (Coombs & Holladay). These characteristics follow closely to the working definition of a crisis provided by Hermann (1963).

Fink (2002) stated a crisis is a “fluid, unstable, dynamic situation—just like an illness” (p. 20), and must be attended to in the same way. His metaphorical analysis that a crisis is like a disease prompted him to identify four distinct stages of a crisis that are
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

medically rooted: (a) prodromal, (b) acute, (c) chronic, and (d) crisis resolution (Fink, 2002). The prodromal, or early symptom stage, is the warning stage and can be the turning point of a crisis; just as in a medical illness, it is much safer and reliable to take care of a problem before it erupts than to treat the illness after it has manifested (Fink, 2002). Fink noted that even if an organization is not able to dispose of the issue before it erupts, the awareness of the prodrome allows for preparation of the next stage, the acute crisis stage. According to his work, in the acute stage, the crisis has erupted, and an organization will most likely be unable to recover the ground it has lost. Although Fink noted that this is the most intense stage, he claimed it is often the shortest of the four stages. The third stage, the chronic crisis stage, is often called the clean-up phase; it is a period of recovery, self-analysis, self-doubt, and healing (Fink, 2002). This phase often lingers two and a half times longer than organizations expect, making crisis management plans essential. Finally, Fink claimed the crisis resolution stage is when the patient is well and whole again.

**Crisis response.** According to Boin (2009), crisis response may best be portrayed as a fragmented network in which multiple organizations and authorities join their efforts in an attempt to respond to the crisis. This can result in a challenging situation in that the various organizations do not typically work together on a daily basis, and the crisis may not easily fall under the responsibility of one agency or leader (Boin, 2009). Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) posited that community agencies often function like silos as a form of simplification. Weick and Sutcliffe proposed that organizations would benefit from creating a network of relationships in order to increase sensitivity to operations, resilience, and the ability to see the big picture. Therefore, according to
Cavanaugh (2006), strong relations before and during a crisis between an organization and local emergency management teams can pay major dividends in the response and recovery operations.

**Impact of crisis.** Organizations are vulnerable and are increasingly susceptible to diverse catastrophic events. These events, or crises, have the potential to impact stakeholders and organizations on multiple levels including, but not limited to, financial loss, reputational damage, injuries and/or deaths, structural or property damage, environmental damage (Coombs, 2012), and psychological damage (Whitla, 2003). Although the impact can be mitigated by careful planning and attention to stakeholders (Cavanaugh, 2006), the complexity pertaining to the unfolding events affects leaders, individuals, and the organization (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008).

**Leaders and crisis.** Leaders during a crisis have higher accountability. They are typically held responsible for the organizational outcomes of the crisis (Heimovics et al., 1993) and are often the key targets for the blame game (Boin, 'T Hart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010). Devitt and Borodzicz (2008) claimed that during a crisis, “command failure” (p. 209) tends to be the focal point. Additionally, leaders are generally under immense scrutiny and followed closely by the media (Boin et al., 2010). Leaders are expected to be strong yet sensitive, offering leadership that manages the situation in a way that minimizes trauma for the stakeholders (Whitla, 2003). Fein, Carlisle, and Isaacson (2008) proposed that leaders are often poorly equipped to make sense of their own traumatic events. Fein et al., argued that during a major crisis, leaders are even more vulnerable and often viewed as super-human, expected to meet the multiple roles and responsibilities of an organization in crisis. Additionally, leaders are often so busy
meeting the needs of their stakeholders and organization that they fail to meet their own emotional and physical needs, thereby increasing their own personal stress and feelings of isolation (Fein et al., 2008). Devitt and Borodzicz (2008) stated, “a leader under severe stress will neither be able to make the effective analysis and decisions required, nor be in a position to support others, if he or she has not attended their own psychological welfare” (p. 212). While Pearson and Clair (1998) proposed that no organization or leader will “respond in a manner that is completely effective or ineffective” (p. 9), Fein et al. (2008) acknowledged that organizations can improve a leader’s effectiveness by preparing all leaders for multiple role responsibilities by providing formal training and stress debriefing methods.

**Individuals and crisis.** According to Mitroff (2005), people hold a set of assumptions such as the world is safe and secure, good and just, stable and predictable, and that crises are rare and limited in scope. When an event violates these assumptions, it can have a traumatic effect perpetuating the questioning of one’s entire belief system (Mitroff). According to Mitroff’s studies, crises can cause deep feelings of betrayal, which can often lead to a loss of meaning in one’s life. Crises can adversely affect a person’s life for an extended period of time (Whitla, 2003). Individuals experiencing a traumatic event need an opportunity to express their emotions and feelings in order to accelerate their recovery (Whitla, 2003). According to the author, organizational and community support professionals often meet this need by providing psychological debriefing opportunities (Whitla, 2003).

**Organizations and crisis.** Crises involve a serious impact disrupting, or affecting the entire organization (Coombs, 2012). Mitroff (2005) claimed that “all businesses are
now essentially in all other businesses, all of the time” (p. 67) and are subject to crises that affect other businesses. According to Pearson and Clair (1998), organizations are at a greater risk when they fail to recognize their vulnerability to crises. They cautioned against faulty reliance on a set of policies and procedures, stating “executive perceptions and the cultural environment must support crisis management plans to be highly effective” (p. 10). Mitroff (2001) claimed that adequately prepared organizations are those that study past crises and identify “patterns and interconnections between them” (p. 38).

**Positives of a crisis.** The Chinese symbol for crisis is actually a combination of two words, danger and opportunity (Fink, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2011). Crises, although categorized as negative events, have the potential to produce positive outcomes (Nicolai, 2008; Ulmer et al., 2011). Smith and Riley (2012) noted major opportunities could be created during the recovery process, giving it an opportunity to “refocus, re-energise [sic] and try new ideas” (p. 64). Similarly, Lalonde (2004), citing the French philosopher Edgar Morin, claimed a crisis might challenge organizational techniques and fundamental values of a social system promoting enhanced professional skills and task development, and prompting social and political change, respectively.

**Educational Institutions and Crises**

Although the dynamics of crises are becoming more complex and far-reaching, the capacity of organizations and leaders to deal with adverse events is growing, according to Boin (2009), citing improved prevention and response to epidemics, and stronger regulations concerning the nation’s infrastructure. However, he proposed further complexity due to the tightly woven infrastructures that characterize modern society, thus challenging organizations to be prepared for the seemingly similar events that play out
differently, overwhelming the normal modes of situation assessment. Smith and Riley (2010) stated that crises are an “inherent reality of schools and school communities” (p. 53), and further proposed that, sooner or later, all educational institutions will face a crisis situation demanding a school leader’s rapid and decisive response.

Gainey (2010) claimed educational institutions, particularly kindergarten through twelfth-grade public schools, are at an enhanced risk due to the fact that they serve local communities and our most vulnerable citizens—children—thus increasing the expectation of an effective and responsible response to crises situations. According to Baldridge (1983), educational institutions are critically different from other organizations due to their client-serving status; he stated the following:

public school systems, hospitals, and welfare agencies, colleges and universities are “people processing” institutions. Society feeds clients with specific needs into the institution and the institution acts upon them and then returns them to society. This is an extremely important fact, for the clients demand and often obtain a significant amount of influence over the decision-making processes of the institution. Even powerless clients such as small schoolchildren usually have protectors such as parents who demand a voice in the operation of the organization. (p. 40)

The tragic shooting at Columbine High School in April of 1999 is generally credited as the turning point (moving from complacency to priority status) of crisis planning in the public school sector (Carr, 2009; Gainey, 2009, 2010); and according to Karen Kleinz, associate director of the National School Public Relations Association, the need for crisis planning has not diminished. On the tenth anniversary of the shooting, Kleinz stated in an interview:

I believe educators no longer operate under the assumption that major crisis events are anomalies that would never happen in our district. Since the tragedy at Columbine, there have been so many unusual and unexpected crises that have touched our schools—other shootings, 9-11, and extreme weather disasters, to name a few—that our heads are forever
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

out of the sand. Proactive crisis planning is now the norm rather than the exception. (Carr, 2009, p. 1)

However, a study involving multiple Metro Atlanta school districts revealed that while eighty percent of districts indicated having a written plan, only fifty percent of respondents believed they were extremely useful (Gainey, 2009). The results listed training, lack of time, personnel, and financial resources as the biggest challenges limiting the ability of educational institutions to better plan for crises.

Without advance planning, educational institutions are put at greater risk (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003). Smith and Riley (2012) proposed that many crises will occur in a school system without warning signals, and the best defense is to create a “powerful awareness” (p. 62) of potential crises that could impact the school. Continuous examination of crisis plans is essential (Schoenberg, 2005). Gainey (2009) recommended educational institutions be cognizant of crisis trends, stating “school districts can learn a lot from each other, because educational systems in one community have much in common with systems elsewhere in the country” (p. 4). Others noted the importance of studying examples of crises in the context of schools as beneficial in understanding and preparing for future school-based crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003).

The organizational structure of educational institutions highlights the fact that while most schools still operate under bureaucratic structures, which benefit the daily operations of the public school setting, hierarchical distribution of power and decision-making during a crisis inhibits effective rapid resolution of the crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). Smith and Riley proposed a shift “from linear thinking to systems thinking, and
from conventional wisdom to flexible decision making” (p. 67) in order to be better prepared for handling a crisis.

**Stakeholders**

Communication and planning are essential (Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). According to Smith and Riley (2012), communication is the leverage point for effectively addressing a crisis and the key attribute for ensuring all stakeholders receive “clear, concise, relevant, accurate and timely information” (p. 68) providing “direction, certainty, and optimism during a crisis” (p. 68). Gainey’s (2009) recommendations were similar, citing internal and external communication and visibility of school leadership as essential elements to meeting stakeholder’s needs. As key public figures, the school leadership plays the primary role of establishing the organization’s communication culture (Gainey, 2009).

**Students During Times of Crisis**

When crises happen, children are at a particular disadvantage, often suffering from psychological distress due to their inability to process the trauma and limited access to support resources (Baum, Rotter, Reidler, & Brom, 2009). However, educational institutions are often the first organization given the opportunity to respond with support and provide the “social infrastructure that allows students to return to a sense of normalcy” (Baum et al., 2009, p. 63). Since children typically spend a large portion of their days at school (Whitla, 2003), the return back to school allows children to be surrounded by peers and educators who can provide other types of support (Baum et al., 2009; Whitla, 2003).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Children not only suffer from the crisis event itself, but from the interruption of their daily routine (Whitla, 2003). Parents, often distracted with tasks associated with disaster-related issues, do not always have the option to reestablish their family life back to their previous routines, often leaving less availability for them to provide physical and emotional support to their children (Whitla, 2003). These additional disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines can increase feelings of instability, causing strains on family relationships (Whitla, 2003). Additionally, according to Whitla, when a crisis is the result of a natural disaster, the aftermath can have lasting effects due to children witnessing the “destruction of homes, property and personal possessions; being personally injured or faced with physical danger; or witnessing the death, injury or pain of others” (p. 149).

Natural Disasters

According to the USDC, natural disasters of billion-dollar status affecting the United States since 1980 include drought, flooding, crop freezing, severe storms, tropical cyclones, wildfires, and winter storms. Of these disasters, tropical cyclones cause the most damage while severe storms account for the highest number of events (USDC, 2014). According to United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2009), natural disasters are the following:

- a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community to cope using its own resources.

Natural disasters affect communities, inducing stress in almost everyone (Whitla, 2003) and requiring a human response system. Mitroff (2004) proposed, “If those human response systems are poorly designed, maintained, and operated, then they can contribute
to a chain reactions of further crises” (p. 88). Organizations can take steps to reduce the impact of crises (Mitroff, 2001; Ulmer et al., 2011). According to Ulmer et al. (2011), organizations should take into account possible threats before constructing their facilities. Likewise, Mitroff (2001, 2004) proposed human contribution through poor workmanship and irresponsible building practices can worsen the effects of a natural disaster. Additionally, decisions made in the aftermath of the disaster can often result in further damage to those involved (Mitroff, 2004; Ulmer et al., 2011).

Educational Institutions and Natural Disasters

According to USAID (2014), restoring educational services after a natural disaster is paramount. The organization, traditionally providing humanitarian aid such as search and rescue, health, food, and shelter, recognized that reopening educational institutions in the aftermath of a disaster has become an essential component in providing vital services such as protection, disaster risk reduction, nutrition, and health. Educational institutions provide the physical support needed in times of crises by providing a safe place to play, nutritious meals, and adult supervision, allowing educational professionals the opportunity to identify those in need of special help (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). The return to routine provides psychosocial health in that the children are allowed the opportunity for self-expression and peer engagement (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Additionally, the re-establishment of daily routines benefits the family unit by providing parents with the time and space to rebuild their lives, re-establish sources of income, and deal with their own emotional issues that come when dealing with a crisis situation (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Whitla, 2003). Meanwhile, the children are gaining their
own sense of renewed hope by reaching goals such as completing homework, preparing for exams, and meeting familiar classroom expectations (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003)

**Crisis Communication During Natural Disasters**

Natural disasters can come at the most unanticipated moment presenting unique challenges such as unplanned extended outages affecting communication and infrastructure, limiting an organization’s ability to effectively communicate with their stakeholders and other emergency response agencies (Cavanaugh, 2006). Clearly, advanced communication regarding the organization’s comprehensive disaster plan, as well as emergency operations and continuity of operations plans, can help mitigate the damage (Cavanaugh, 2006). Cavanaugh (2006), reflecting upon his own involvement in a natural disaster as president of a university, listed four essential elements needed in order to maximize the likelihood of success in dealing with a natural disaster: (a) comprehensive planning, (b) decisiveness, (c) execution, and (d) personal touch. Cavanaugh noted the importance of comprehensive planning in which there is clear communication of roles and responsibilities of key personnel, and identification of the criteria for campus or organization closure and/or evacuation. Cavanaugh claimed decisiveness and execution are the difference between a successful and unsuccessful response to the event, stating communication should be “simple, unambiguous, to the point, and reliable” (p. 8). He also reiterated the importance of not assuming that people know there is a crisis, but to clearly state the status of the event in order for the leader to clearly communicate his or her command of the situation.

Preventing or lessening the negative effects of a crisis is the primary goal of crisis communication (Spence, Lachlan, & Griffin, 2007). However, when natural disaster hits,
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

affecting diverse populations, one cannot assume that the message is equally received (Ulmer et al., 2011). The dismal failure of communication and response during the Hurricane Katrina crisis illuminated the importance of considering the target population when attempting to communicate about an imminent disaster (Ulmer et al., 2011). During the crisis, communication was presented in a culturally neutral manner, assuming that all stakeholders act on and access crisis communication in the same way (Ulmer et al., 2011). According to Ulmer et al. (2011), this inadvertently led to underrepresented groups being neglected and even abandoned. The study identified the need for a culturally centered approach where an organization considers the target population when determining the content and planned dissemination of the crisis message. This transition from a culturally neutral message, where no consideration is given to the socioeconomic background or crisis communication needs of the underrepresented, to a culturally centered message could be the difference in reaching the underrepresented in times of crisis (Ulmer et al., 2011).

Crisis Management

Crisis management is challenging; and when crisis management fails, leaders, stakeholders, and organizations suffer. Mitroff and Pearson (1993) stated “virtually no organizations would go into business without significant insurance coverage, yet far too few organizations have systematic and integrated programs in crisis management” (p. xiii). They claimed organizational events and situations are far too varied and complex to rely on one universal plan, and yet no organization can fully prepare for every possible type of crisis. However, according to Fink (2002), there is no excuse for inadequate planning. The author recommended developing contingency plans or conditional
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

thinking, where the organization plans for various types of crises so that key decisions of
the mechanical portions of the crisis are outlined; this leaves the leader free to manage
the content portion of the crisis. Mitroff and Pearson (1993) suggested the following
strategies to manage a crisis: (a) preparation for a broad range of crises, (b) consideration
of cultural, human, organizational and technical factors, involvement of various
stakeholders; and (c) attention to all five phases of a crisis (signal detection, preparation
and prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning).

Crisis management as practiced over the past 20 years has been inadequate
(Mitroff, 2004). According to Mitroff, organizations can no longer focus solely on the
external factors as the primary cause of a crisis; they have a responsibility to consider all
of the sources perpetuating a crisis including the internal workings and design of an
organization. His more recent writings promote a transition from the primarily reactive
response of crisis management to the proactive approach of crisis leadership in which the
organizations identify and prepare for a crisis before it happens.

According to Pearson and Clair (1998), “it is unrealistic to define as effective only
those efforts that pull an organization unscathed through such events. Conversely, simply
surviving a crisis may not be a sufficiently stringent criterion for success” (p. 2).
Therefore, in an attempt to define effective crisis management, Pearson and Clair listed
the following criteria: (a) a return to organizational core activities that meet the needs of
key customers, (b) minimization of organizational and stakeholder losses, and (c)
organizational learning where the learning is used for future crisis planning.
Crisis Management Leadership

Identifying effective leadership during a crisis can be problematic (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008). The varied contexts of crises, differences in personal characteristics of leaders, status of team dynamics, multi-agency interactions, and the culture and hierarchy of an organization make it difficult to assess the level of impact a leader had toward success (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008). However, a review of the literature related to effective crisis leadership revealed several common elements, with Smith and Riley (2012) offering the most comprehensive list. Smith and Riley’s nine attributes include: (a) decisive decision-making, (b) intuition, (c) flexibility, (d) creativity and lateral thinking, (e) tenacity and optimism, (f) procedural intelligence, (g) synthesizing skills, (h) empathy and respect, and (i) communication and media skills.

Decisive decision-making. According to Smith and Riley (2012), the ability to make clear and decisive decisions is one of the major attributes of a leader in a crisis. Schoenberg (2005) concurred noting that effective leaders need to have experience in taking command and demonstrate their ability to gain control over the situation in order to gain organizational and stakeholder trust. Leader confidence in decision-making is essential since stakeholders make their own assessments of the crisis situation and have their own ideas of resolution, undermining the capacity of leaders (Boin, 2009).

Intuition. In times of crisis, factual information is limited, and the need to make decisions based on intuition is prevalent (Smith & Riley, 2012). Decisions made using intuition are not information free, yet they are decisions made with respect to the legitimacy of available information combined with the perceived appropriate action (Smith & Riley, 2012). In earlier writings, Smith and Riley (2010) proposed intuition is
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

about listening to the voice inside your head saying something is about to happen and then taking the time to look for emerging issues.

**Flexibility.** According to Boin (2009), crisis response requires “flexibility, improvisation, redundancy, and the occasional breaking of rules” (p. 373). It is about forgetting the rules and doing what needs to be done as quickly as possible (Smith & Riley, 2010).

**Creativity and lateral thinking.** A need to return things to normal impacts strategies, processes, and procedures, limiting recovery to the way things were before the event (Smith & Riley, 2012). In many situations, it is impossible to recover exactly what was lost and return things to normal, requiring leaders to be open-minded about future possibilities (Smith & Riley, 2010).

**Tenacity and optimism.** According to Boin (2009), leaders must offer convincing rationale as a basis for action at a time when their audience is feeling anxious or fearful. Leaders in crises are often looked upon to provide assurance and hope for all affected members of the organization or community (Smith & Riley, 2012).

**Procedural intelligence.** Smith and Riley (2012) defined procedural intelligence as the “knowledge of what works best for crises that conform with known principles—crises that have occurred previously in essentially the same form” (p. 67).

**Synthesizing skills.** Kofman and Senge (1993) identified fragmentation, competition, and reactiveness as “frozen patterns of thought to be dissolved” (p. 6). They argued the need for a Galilean shift whereas leaders “move from the primacy of pieces to the primacy of the whole” (p. 6) in order to solve the complex issues facing organizations today.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

**Empathy and respect.** According to Devitt and Borodzicz (2008), crisis leaders need the capacity to place themselves in the position of stakeholders and victims in order to recognize their diverse needs.

**Communication and media skills.** Effective two-way communication is critical to addressing a crisis (Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). Gainey (2009) claimed that effective two-way communication builds relationships with both internal and external stakeholders.

However, according to Devitt and Borodzicz (2008), it is not just the possession of certain attributes or skills that determines a successful outcome; rather, it is how those skills are combined and used at the appropriate time and place that makes the difference. Schoenberg (2005) posited that the key to managing a crisis may not be advanced crisis preparation, but a focus on developing the skills of those individuals in the organizations identified as the most effective leaders to lead during a crisis. He identified the need for leaders to assess their own skill sets before the crisis and work to improve their adaptive capacities because different situations call for different approaches (Schoenberg, 2005).

Schoenberg’s (2005) proposition is similar to the recent writings of Mitroff (2005) on why some companies emerge stronger than others after a crisis. Mitroff claimed that crisis leaders need the right heart, thinking, social and political skills, integration, technical skills, transfer, and soul in order to anticipate, plan for, and survive a crisis. He noted that the right heart involves leaders having emotional capacity and resilience, with the ability to confront the crises straight on, while right thinking pertains to the ability to think outside the box and beyond the silos. He also proposed that the right social and political skill is the ability to move past organizational charts, advancing
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

and retreating when necessary, and accepting people's fears and anxieties. Mitroff's research identified the need for integration in which leaders accept the fuzziness, realizing there is no one correct answer; leaders benefit from viewing and solving problems from multiple points of view. He claimed that the current tenets of crisis management are no longer sufficient and require improved technical skills to envisage and respond to abnormal crises, stating that organizations and leaders are "fighting new wars with old strategies" (p. 98). Furthermore, there is a misconception that organizations are like a machine with separate departments, functions, and divisions (Mitroff, 2005). This misconception promotes an assumption that organizations and leaders can make changes in these silos without affecting other silos; therefore, the author proposed having the right transfer and soul. Transfer and soul are intertwined; transfer involves the acknowledgement of an interconnected system, while soul is concerned with the reestablishment of one's meaning and purpose and how it interconnects with the system (Mitroff, 2005). Mitroff claimed these seven essential lessons can help organizations and leaders overcome the challenges of crisis management leadership.

Conceptual Framework

For this dissertation, the multiframe perspective created by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2008) will be used to frame the study. This framework will provide a useful way to conceptualize the thinking and action of leaders during such an ambiguous time, providing a comprehensive picture of the role of leadership during a crisis. Weick (2007), in his discussion of sensemaking within organizations, claimed that people place items into frameworks in order to understand, construct meaning, and obtain a mutual understanding of an event. He added that human situations, when put into a framework,
are progressively clarified, while Heimovics et al. (1993) proposed that management literature supports a multiple frame perspective to explain organizations and their performance. Goldman and Smith’s (1991) research found the early editions of Bolman and Deal’s (1991) book on reframing a meaningful model for understanding the complexity of schools. Goldman and Smith (1991) cited the appropriateness of the framework in order to understand (a) the salience of the human resource issues, (b) the extensive meanings associated with educational issues, (c) the blurring of the lines between external environmental influence, and (d) the bureaucracy and structure associated with educational institutions.

The Bolman and Deal (2008) framework involves four frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. These four frames serve as mental models, a set of assumptions that one uses to assess a situation and determine a response, or a type of map in order to assemble pieces of information into a picture of what is happening (Bolman & Deal, 2008). They created the multiframe perspective after they themselves were challenged to blend their own dramatically different worldviews while team-teaching a course at Harvard (Bolman & Deal, 1991). The model enabled them to capture their differences and create a sense of shared understanding of the task on hand (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Bolman and Deal (1991) postulated the need for a framework claiming that the complexity of the human experience underscores the endemic challenge of getting the right picture in order to respond appropriately to a situation. They argued their point by stating, “if our image of a situation is wrong, our actions will be wide of the mark as well” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, pp. 7-8). They claimed the use of all four frames provides
three advantages: (a) coherency, (b) comprehensiveness, and (c) the ability to reframe; ignoring any one of them is perilous (Bolman & Deal, 1992). Reframing is the ability to think about situations from multiple perspectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Their research revealed leader and organizational overreliance on the structural and human resource frames, and an underuse of the political and symbolic frames (Bolman & Deal, 1992). Additionally, their studies indicated that manager effectiveness is most closely linked to the use of the structural frame, while effective leadership is most closely related to the use of the symbolic frame (1992).

**Structural Frame**

The most common way of thinking about an organization is through the structural frame, the current approach to organizational design (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The structural perspective focuses on placing the right people in the right roles, which provide the opportunity for individuals and the organizations to reach their goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The following six assumptions undergird the structural frame: (a) organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives; (b) specialization and division of labor enhances performance and efficiency; (c) coordination and control ensure the integration of diverse efforts of individuals and departments; (d) rationality prevails over personal agendas and external pressures; (e) structures are designed to fit current goals, technology, workforce, and environment; and (f) problems are a result of deficiencies in the structure (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Bolman and Gallos (2011) likened the structural perspective to factories designed to transform inputs to outputs efficiently and effectively while integrating the diverse efforts of individuals, groups, divisions, and departments in order to attain quality and alignment with an organization’s mission and goals. They noted that
structure allows the organization to keep producing what it was designed to produce whether good or bad.

**Leaders and the structural frame.** Under the structural frame perspective, leaders “value analysis and data, keep their eye on the bottom line, set clear directions, and hold people accountable for results” (Bolman & Gallos, 2011, p. 35). Leaders also attempt to solve problems through the establishment of policies and procedures (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Leaders are expected to make things better, which means change is inevitable; and having a structure that involves transparency, dialogue, and attention to a legitimate process provides enough support for change to happen (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). From the structural frame perspective leaders keep asking, Is the current structure right? Effective leaders realize structures evolve and are willing to revise as needed (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

In the educational arena, leaders are analysts of the production process and the designers of the systems. They define the rules, roles, policies and procedures to meet the campus goals (Bolman & Gallos, 2011); and while most are designed to respond to uncertainty, they can also be contributors of uncertainty by failing to define where people are and where they want them to go (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Heimovics et al. (1993) noted non-profit organizations are open systems dependent upon resources and transactions while simultaneously interacting with a changing environment in order to survive.

**Human Resource Frame**

The human resource frame centers on the interrelationship between the organization and its people, and it is built upon the following assumptions: (a) an
organization’s existence is to serve human needs; (b) organizations and people are in a mutualistic relationship; (c) the misfit between the two, organizations and people, causes harm; and (d) a good fit between the two promotes meaningful and satisfying work, and organizational success (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The frame acknowledges the enduring needs and motives of humans, and supports the development of people (Bolman & Deal, 2008). When organizations get it right, their employees are more likely to be productive and innovative, and less likely to leave their job for a better offer (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Bolman and Deal identified the following basic resource strategies in order to get it right, beginning with the development of a shared philosophy for managing people, selecting the right people, and creating ways to share the wealth, empower them, and promote a diverse environment.

**Leaders and the human resource frame.** Under the human resource perspective, “leaders value relationships and feelings and seek to lead through facilitation and empowerment. When problems arise, they are likely to favor remedies like participation and training” (Bolman & Deal, 1992, p. 35). A leader’s style can have a powerful effect on productivity and morale; therefore, it is beneficial for leaders to understand and appreciate both their own style and the style of coworkers in order to promote positive interpersonal relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

**Political Frame**

The political frame, according to Bolman and Deal (2008), is the “realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent resources” (p. 190), putting “politics at the heart of decision-making” (p. 190). Within the political frame perspective, the following assumptions apply. Organizations,
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

according to Bolman and Deal, are coalitions in which its members, both individuals and interest groups, have differing “values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality” (p. 194). Within this frame, the most important decisions involve the allocation of scarce resources, placing conflict in the center and thus creating the most important asset—power, whereas goals and decisions emerge from the ongoing process of bargaining and negotiation (Bolman & Deal, 2008). According to Baldridge (1983), complex organizations can be studied as miniature political systems since people use their influence to protect or further their own special interests. He noted that in the political model some decisions draw the attention of interest groups, powerful individuals, and the bureaucratic process while others do not. The political frame seems to be replete with continuous conflict in competition for scarce resources (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

**Leaders and the political frame.** Although the political frame carries a predominately negative connotation, leaders using the political frame acknowledge the need to mobilize constituencies (Heimovics et al., 1993) in order to establish viable courses of actions for an organization (Baldridge, 1983). Leaders using the political frame “are advocates and negotiators who spend much of their time networking, creating coalitions, building a power base, and negotiating compromise” (Bolman & Deal, 1992, p. 35). They see conflict as a “source of energy rather than a cause for alarm” (Bolman & Deal, 1992, p. 35).

**Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame focuses on how symbols and symbolic actions as part of everyday life are particularly perceptible in times of uncertainty and ambiguity (Bolman
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

& Deal, 2008). Often times, people desiring to find direction, hope, and faith create symbols. These symbols mediate the meaning of work, thereby anchoring an organization’s culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This frame is subtle and complex, based on intuition and artistry; it is often puzzling, elusive, or mysterious, but it gets to the heart of issues of meaning and faith that none of the other perspectives capture (Bolman & Deal, 1992). Bolman and Deal (1992) claimed that more organizations are realizing that “culture, soul, and spirit are the wellsprings of high performance” (p. 43) while the “symbolic glue is central to business success” (p. 43).

Leaders and the symbolic frame. Leaders using the symbolic frame perspective instill a sense of enthusiasm and commitment through charisma and drama, paying close attention to myth, ritual, ceremony, and stories (Bolman & Deal, 1991). When things go wrong they attempt to “articulate a new story or revisit cherished values” (Bolman & Deal, 1992, p. 35). In reference to leaders and teamwork, Bolman and Deal (1992) claimed the symbolic frame as the “heart of team building” (p. 43), and encouraged leaders to view facts as interpretive rather than objective, focusing on meaning and the process of social interaction.

Summary of Four Frames

In any given situation, a cognitive map provides a rational process for gathering information, analyzing a situation, and developing strategies to address an issue, and the multiframe perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) provides such a map. The structural frame acknowledges the influence that formal structure has on an organization, while the human resource frame highlights the relationship between the people and the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The political frame focuses on the decisions made
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

within the context of scarce resources and divergent agendas, whereas the symbolic frame focuses on how humans make sense of a chaotic and ambiguous world (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Effective leaders and organizations, when facing significant challenges such as responding to a complex situation that involves the skills and commitment from a variety of people and organizations (Rice & Harris, 2003), depend upon multiple frames to provide a holistic picture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Therefore, the framework of Bolman and Deal (2008) will be useful for making sense of the complexity involved when an organization experiences a crisis.

Conclusion

This literature review has provided a discussion relating to the various important aspects of crises. The working definition provided by Hermann (1963) supplied a foundation for the study, identifying a crisis as an unexpected or unanticipated event that threatens the values of an organization and requires a timely response. Fink (2002) characterized crises as fluid, unstable, and dynamic situations. The literature revealed the various negative impacts a crisis may have on leaders, individuals, and organizations, as well as some possible positive outcomes of crises.

The next section revealed the unique aspects of educational institutions in crisis. Baldridge (1983) drew particular attention to the unique role of public schools, identifying their status as people processing institutions, whereas other authors noted the importance of crisis awareness (Schoenberg, 2005), crisis planning (Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012), and the need for systems thinking in a predominately bureaucratic structure (Smith & Riley, 2012). The literature also revealed the essential role
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

educational institutions play in meeting the particular needs of stakeholders and students in times of crisis.

The third section discussed natural disasters, and the effect they can have upon the educational community and communication during a crisis. The literature revealed ways organizations can mitigate the impact of such crises (Mitroff, 2001, 2004; Ulmer et al., 2011), and how educational institutions, in particular, provide children and families the opportunity to return to a familiar routine (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Since natural disasters often affect communities that are most likely diverse to some extent, discussion was provided addressing the importance of culturally sensitive communication during a natural disaster.

The fourth section provided an examination of crisis management and crisis management leadership. Several authors proposed the importance of adequate and continuous crisis planning (Fink, 2002; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993; Pearson & Clair, 1998), while Pearson and Clair (1998) offered their definition of effective management, which included an organization’s return to core activities, minimization of losses, and organizational learning that involved future crisis planning. Smith and Riley (2012) provided the most comprehensive list of essential attributes of effective crisis leadership, which was supported by several other authors (Boin, 2009; Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008; Gainey, 2009; Mitroff, 2005; Schoenberg, 2005).

The final section of the literature review presented the Bolman and Deal (2008) framework. This conceptual framework will provide greater understanding of the intricacies of crisis leadership during and immediately after a crisis. Crisis management literature supports the use of a multiframe perspective in order to understand, construct
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

meaning, and develop a mutual understanding of an event (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goldman & Smith, 1991; Heimovics et al. 1993; Weick, 2007). Goldman and Smith (1991) found the framework especially appropriate when studying educational institutions due to the prevalence of human resource, symbolic, political, and structural issues common in educational organizations. Therefore, in an attempt to understand one educational institution’s response to a crisis, the Bolman and Deal (2008) framework will be used to analyze the responses of various leaders to a crisis situation in order to identify lessons learned so that leaders and organizations may be better prepared for future crises.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE
LESSONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF A CATASTROPIC TORNADO

To be submitted to *Educational Leadership*, an *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)* journal

Jeri Goswick

Cynthia J. MacGregor

Acknowledgements to:

Beth Hurst

Renee White
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Lessons in the Aftermath of a Catastrophic Tornado

Here it is five years later: a community nearing the end of recovery. The debris has been removed, houses have been rebuilt, and the majority of business are up and running. Things are back to normal, or in reality, back to the new normal after suffering one of the most catastrophic tornados to hit the United States. The multi-vortex EF-5 tornado, making the list of The Ten Deadliest Documented Tornado Events in the United States, injured more than 1000 and took the lives of 158 people on May 22nd, 2011 in Joplin, Missouri (USDC, n.d.). Those who survived the tornado will quickly admit that some things will never be the same.

At the time this article was written, the 5th year anniversary was quickly approaching. The community was planning a series of events to remember the lives lost on that day and to celebrate progress. Likewise, Joplin Schools, which lost seven students and one staff member, was making its own plans of remembrance—a moment of silence during the graduation ceremony to honor those who perished on that exact same day five years earlier.

Recently, I had the opportunity to interview various leaders and teachers in the district who experienced the crisis first hand. They had much to offer concerning surviving a crisis of this magnitude. My goal is to share some of their insights gained in an attempt to help others understand the depth trauma can have on individuals. My hope is to increase the opportunity for leaders and teachers to improve their response to individuals in crisis by sharing their stories.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Crises Promote Empathy

In an interview with a teacher who survived the tornado in her home that was completely destroyed and lost her classroom in the building where she worked, revelations of increased empathy were evident. The awareness was a result of her own experience of returning to work, when her mind was consumed with uncertainty, stress, fear of the unknown, and grief for all that she had lost. She spoke of the struggle in the following comment.

The blessing from that [meaning suffering her own crisis] is that I get it [the suffering of others] more today. When children come in hungry, beaten, and abused, and we want to teach them; and all they are is angry. I mean for me, I couldn’t get anything else in my head. The trauma was so great that I just couldn’t get anything else in. I didn’t want to learn anything new. I just couldn’t bring in any new information.

Fortunately, the teacher had a resource, a counselor knowledgeable about children and crisis, who gave the teacher some great advice.

I remember he [the counselor] said, ‘Don’t ignore the elephant in the room. These kids have stories, and they need to tell them.’ So we had kids write their stories. They are difficult to read, because they are raw and fresh… We have to acknowledge what they went through. I think that talking about it is part of the process. Personally, I still have to tell people that I survived; and that it was real.

The Joplin School district was able to employ several professional counselors to meet the emotional needs of its stakeholders. These counselors were instrumental in helping
students, teachers, and leaders reconcile their own crisis experience. Five years later, the district continues to employ a crisis counselor to support students in crisis.

The teacher is still teaching today, working with students of all backgrounds. As she reflects on the 5th anniversary, she grieves for what she has lost, but is grateful for what she has gained. She feels much more capable of helping students in crisis as a result of her own experience, and she quickly offers words of encouragement and understanding to those in her path that are suffering from their own crisis.

**Normal is Different Now**

For those that experienced a personal loss, life is different. Crises change things. As one teacher revealed, “There is no more normal like it used to be, and I think that people that did not go through it, did not understand. It’s a different normal.” She goes on to explain the depth of her loss.

To this day, people will say something about pictures of when you were little. I don’t have that. I don’t have my grandmother’s China. I don’t have baby pictures to give to my children. I don’t have those things… I have to live that…. Sometimes I have to remind people when they say, ‘well everybody should be over that, it has been five years.’ I don’t have those things, and I will never have those things.

The depth of loss is still fresh today, five years later. Another teacher who lost both personally and professionally became emotional as he reflected on his loss.

I thought I was pretty much done with grief, but uh, I haven’t had any one ask me for a while. … I don't think people understood what normal was going to be, that
there wasn’t really a normal because there was a line drawn at least in my life, pre-storm and post-storm; and that will remain, it won’t go away.

There are different levels of crisis and different levels of suffering, and the fact is—healing takes time, and not everyone heals at the same time. This was apparent in the response of another teacher who I requested to interview; “I am just not ready to revisit that time in my life.” Her response confirmed what many of us already know—crises can adversely affect a person’s life for an extended period of time (Whitla, 2003).

Leaders Need Extra Care

Leading during a time of crisis is stressful. Several of the leaders interviewed revealed being stretched in various ways, particularly in decision-making. One leader expressed it like this:

All the organization that had to be done on a daily basis; we were developing a new program, and we were trying to design a new school around it. All going on at the same time so, that was a big job. I’ll admit; it stretched me.

The superintendent revealed an area that stretched him and his followers: the inability to slow down. He remembers days when he had to consciously remind himself that this crisis response was not a sprint; it was a marathon, and it would take years to finish.

We developed a team of workaholics at that point and we could never, even after the immediate crisis, we could never seem to slow down. We couldn’t stop running, we didn’t know how to downshift and gear down to a different level. All we knew was this break-neck pace for so long that we didn’t know what normal was like anymore. We just went. And, that was harmful in a lot of ways, not just
from a health and mental health perspective, but also from an organizational
perspective.

Another leader revealed he did not decompress for almost two years, admitting to not
sitting down and talking to someone [a crisis counselor] until the end of the second year
after the crisis.

The superintendent, having reflected upon his own personal experience over the
past few years, revealed the following thoughts about leaders:

Leaders are not bullet proof; they are human. With that being the case, they have
to take care of themselves, too. If they aren’t capable of taking care of
themselves, how are they going to take care of other people?

The superintendent recommended that leaders make sure they are eating right, getting
enough sleep, exercising regularly, and spending quality time with family. He
acknowledged that staying healthy and maintaining relationships was probably more
important during a crisis situation than any other time.

What We Can Learn

As the years have passed, moments of reflection have provided some valuable
insights about the impact of crises on individuals. Crises are perceptual; in other words,
if an individual believes something is a crisis, then it is a crisis (Coombs & Holladay,
2010). Understanding this concept alone can improve our ability to respond to the needs
around us with empathy. When an individual is in crisis, special care needs to be taken in
order to validate their experience and support them in the healing process. This requires
us as leaders and educators to see the world through their eyes. Mitroff (2005) explained
that individuals hold a set of assumptions such as the world is safe and secure, good and
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

just, stable and predictable, and when an event violates these assumptions, it can have a traumatic effect. Crises can have a serious impact on individuals, limiting their ability to adequately function for an extended period of time. Allowing those experiencing a crisis the opportunity to express their emotions and feelings can accelerate their recovery (Whitla, 2003).

What We Can Do Now

As educators and leaders of educational institutions, we must not only be prepared to respond to a crisis event, but we must be prepared to meet the emotional needs of those who experienced the crisis. This means we must acknowledge the impact that crises can have on individuals and increase our ability to empathize (see Figure 1). We can accomplish this by making people aware that empathy is a behavior, not a feeling, and can be learned. Therefore, we can learn to respond more effectively to individuals in crisis by anticipating their needs and placing measures in place to meet those needs.

When individuals experience serious loss, it is important to provide a voice to their emotional concerns. This can be challenging, because people are often concerned with what to say. However, individuals in crisis just want to know someone cares. Developing those deep relationships that foster support and concern and allowing those in crisis to share their experience can make a significant difference in the healing process of those affected by crisis.

Leaders have similar needs and are more vulnerable in times of crisis. They often are viewed as super-human and expected to meet the multiple roles and responsibilities of an organization in crisis; and many times they fail to meet their own emotional and physical needs, increasing their own amount of stress (Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

They experience an immense amount of pressure and intense scrutiny when responding to a crisis (Whitla, 2003). Special care needs to be taken by the stakeholders of an organization to make sure measures are put in place to support leaders in a crisis situation thereby minimizing harm to the leader and the organization. Institutions could develop a crisis plan that includes a plan to support leaders within the organization that are carrying the bulk of the load. This is not commonly seen in crisis plans, but after experiencing a crisis of this magnitude, the superintendent views this step as essential in order to maintain a healthy organization. Crises can have a traumatic effect on individuals, yet as leaders and educators, we can mitigate the trauma by anticipating the needs of stakeholders and providing the emotional resources needed to support them.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Figure 1: Lessons Learned

- **Crisis Promotes Empathy**
- **Increased Awareness**
- **The Elephant in the Room**

- **Normal is Different Now**
- **Crisis Changes Things**
- **Healing is Different for Everyone**

- **Leaders Need Extra Care**
- **Decision Fatigue**
- **A Workaholic Trap**
- **Inability to Decompress**

- **Understanding Crises**
- **Crisis Are Preceptual**
- **Crisis Can Have a Traumatic Effect**

- **What We Can Do Now**
- **Develop Empathy**
- **Allow a Voice to the Emotional Concerns of Others**
- **Create a System of Support at All Levels**
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

References


CHAPTER FIVE

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP
Lessons Learned in a Crisis Situation: The Joplin Schools’ Story

To be submitted to *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*

Jeri Goswick

Cynthia MacGregor

Beth Hurst

Patricia (T.C) Wall

Renee White
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Abstract

Natural disasters affect millions of lives each year, devastating educational institutions across the world (United States Agency for International Development, 2010). This qualitative study was designed using a case-study approach to understand one school district’s leadership response to a catastrophic crisis in order to gain lessons learned that could prepare other non-profit, public educational intuitions in a future crisis. The study, using the framework of Bolman and Deal (2008), identified specific areas within each of the four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, that should be considered when responding to a major disaster.

Keywords: case study, crisis, crisis response, Bolman and Deal framework, qualitative
Lessons Learned in a Crisis Situation: The Joplin Schools’ Story

On May 22, 2011, a catastrophic tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, becoming the most recent addition to the Ten Deadliest Documented Tornado Events and ranking at number seven in United States history injuring more than 1000 and killing 158 people (USDC, n.d.). The multi-vortex EF-5 tornado left a 13-mile path, a mile wide, destroying one-third of the city, damaging or destroying half of the school district, and taking the lives of seven Joplin School District students and one staff member (Joplin Schools, 2015). With more than 4,200 students without a school to attend, the calendar year for Joplin Schools ended that day, 10 school days earlier than scheduled. This event challenged the school district’s leadership to design and build temporary facilities in less than three months in order to reopen the school district by the 2011-2012 academic school year as envisioned by the superintendent of the district.

The purpose of this case study was to conduct inquiry into the administrative approach during the crisis situation at Joplin Public Schools. This particular study focused primarily on the leadership response to the events, emotions, and consequences associated with the crisis, and analyzed the decisions made through the structural, political, human resource, and symbolic framework of Bolman and Deal (2008) in hopes of offering lessons learned that could mitigate or prepare other non-profit, public educational institutions in a future crisis event.

While there is a significant amount of studies related to crisis management, research addressing examples of crises in the context of public schools and their communities is limited (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008; Nicolai, 2008; Smith & Riley, 2012). The Joplin School District’s dramatic recovery offers evidence of the crucial role
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

leadership plays in crisis management, particularly in the public school setting. By analyzing how one educational institution handled a crisis, other administrators and leaders can assess their crisis-ready plans, improve their opportunities to make effective decisions, and take appropriate action during a crisis (Whitla, 2003). This particular study narrowed the timeframe of the investigation to during and immediately after the crisis, a critical time in which the followers looked to the leaders for guidance and support.

Analyzing such a complex process as rebuilding a district after a crisis requires the “ability to think about situations in more than one way” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 6). Bolman and Deal (2008) proposed the idea of reframing a situation in order to capture a “more comprehensive picture” (p. 6). Therefore, the multiframe perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) provided a useful framework to view the school district’s leadership response to the catastrophic event and the types of decisions and pressures organizations face during a critical time.

Background and History

Natural disasters affect millions of lives each year, devastating educational institutions across the world (United States Agency for International Development, USAID, 2010). Since 1980, the United States has sustained more than 178 weather and climate disasters where the overall costs of damages reached or exceeded one billion dollars (U.S. Department of Commerce, USDC, 2014). These natural disasters often affect the infrastructure required to sustain an educational system. Schools are destroyed, teachers and students are displaced, and the damage can be overwhelming; timely
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

recovery is critical and can be the lifeline for those affected by such a crisis (USAID, 2010).

Although crises are not unexpected, they can be unpredictable, challenging organizations to be crisis-ready (Coombs, 2012). Educational institutions in crisis experience unique challenges unlike other organizations in that crises within an educational setting directly impact their ability to meet the needs of their primary stakeholders whom they serve (a) students, (b) families, and (c) communities (Whitla, 2003). Crises are no longer rare or random events; they are inevitable, natural features prominent in today’s society, with the rate of events increasing at a dramatic pace (Mitroff, 2001, 2005). No longer is the question of whether a major crisis will impact an organization; the only real question is how, when, and which type (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993).

For the purposes of this study, the definition of a crisis provided by Hermann (1963) was used; a crisis as an event that “(1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization” (p. 64). Crises are anomalies, not because one thinks they will never happen, such as a natural disaster or a plane crash, but because they are events outside of what a stakeholder expects to happen (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

Educational Institutions and Crises

Although the dynamics of crises are becoming more complex and far-reaching, the capacity of organizations and leaders to deal with adverse events is growing as a result of improved prevention and response to epidemics and stronger regulations
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

cerning the nation’s infrastructure (Boin, 2009). However, the author proposed
further complexity due to the tightly woven infrastructures that characterize modern
society, thus challenging organizations to be prepared for the seemingly similar events
that play out differently, overwhelming the normal modes of situation assessment. Smith
and Riley (2010) stated that crises are an “inherent reality of schools and school
communities” (p. 53), and further proposed that, sooner or later, all educational
institutions will face a crisis situation demanding a school leader’s rapid and decisive
response.

Gainey (2010) claimed educational institutions, particularly kindergarten through
twelfth-grade public schools, are at an enhanced risk due to the fact that they serve local
communities and our most vulnerable citizens—children—thus increasing the
expectation of an effective and responsible response to crises situations. According to
Baldrige (1983), educational institutions are critically different from other organizations
due to their client-serving status; he stated the following:

public school systems, hospitals, and welfare agencies, colleges and
universities are “people processing” institutions. Society feeds clients
with specific needs into the institution and the institution acts upon them
and then returns them to society. This is an extremely important fact, for
the clients demand and often obtain a significant amount of influence over
the decision-making processes of the institution. Even powerless clients
such as small schoolchildren usually have protectors such as parents who
demand a voice in the operation of the organization. (p. 40)

The tragic shooting at Columbine High School in April of 1999 is generally
credited as the turning point (moving from complacency to priority status) of crisis
planning in the public school sector (Carr, 2009; Gainey, 2009, 2010). However, a study
involving multiple Metro Atlanta school districts revealed that while 80% of districts
indicated having a written plan, only 50% of respondents believed they were extremely
useful (Gainey, 2009). The results listed training, lack of time, personnel, and financial resources as the biggest challenges limiting the ability of educational institutions to better plan for crises.

Without advance planning, educational institutions are put at greater risk (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003). Smith and Riley (2012) proposed that many crises will occur in a school system without warning signals, and the best defense is to create a “powerful awareness” (p. 62) of potential crises that could impact the school. Continuous examination of crisis plans is essential (Schoenberg, 2005). Gainey (2009) recommended educational institutions be cognizant of crisis trends, stating “school districts can learn a lot from each other, because educational systems in one community have much in common with systems elsewhere in the country” (p. 4). Others noted the importance of studying examples of crises in the context of schools as beneficial in understanding and preparing for future school-based crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012; Whitla, 2003).

Stakeholders

Communication and planning are essential (Gainey, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). According to Smith and Riley (2012), communication is the leverage point for effectively addressing a crisis and the key attribute for ensuring all stakeholders receive “clear, concise, relevant, accurate and timely information” (p. 68) providing “direction, certainty, and optimism during a crisis” (p. 68). Gainey’s (2009) recommendations were similar, citing internal and external communication and visibility of school leadership as essential elements to meeting stakeholder’s needs. As key public figures, the school leadership
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

plays the primary role of establishing the organization’s communication culture (Gainey, 2009).

Students During Times of Crisis

When crises happen, children are at a particular disadvantage, often suffering from psychological distress due to their inability to process the trauma and limited access to support resources (Baum, Rotter, Reidler, & Brom, 2009). Educational institutions are often the first organization given the opportunity to respond with support and provide the “social infrastructure that allows students to return to a sense of normalcy” (Baum et al., 2009, p. 63). Since children typically spend a large portion of their days at school (Whitla, 2003), the return back to school allows children to be surrounded by peers and educators who can provide other types of support (Baum et al., 2009; Whitla, 2003).

Children not only suffer from the crisis event itself, but from the interruption of their daily routine (Whitla, 2003). Parents, often distracted with tasks associated with disaster-related issues, do not always have the option to reestablish their family life back to their previous routines. This leaves parents less time and availability to provide physical and emotional support to their children (Whitla, 2003). These additional disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines can increase feelings of instability, causing strains on family relationships (Whitla, 2003). Additionally, when a crisis is the result of a natural disaster, the aftermath can have lasting effects due to children witnessing the “destruction of homes, property and personal possessions; being personally injured or faced with physical danger; or witnessing the death, injury or pain of others” (Whitla, 2003, p. 149).
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Framework

The study used the four-frame perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) in order to organize the study. Bolman and Deal (2008) proposed this multiframe orientation as a means for leaders and organizations to understand organizational life. Weick (1995), in his discussion of sensemaking within organizations, claimed that people place items into frameworks in order to understand, construct meaning, and obtain a mutual understanding of an event. He noted that human situations, when put into a framework, are progressively clarified. Management literature supports a multi-frame approach to explain organizations and their performance (Heimovics, Herman, & Jurkiewicz, 1993). Bolman and Deal (2008) claimed using multiple frames will help organizations address problems more effectively.

Multiframe thinking requires moving beyond a narrow perspective of how to handle an issue, and provides an opportunity to capture more than one aspect of organizational life (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The four frames, identified as structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, offer this multiframe perspective. The frameworks are powerful, memorable tools that may help people realize factors they may have overlooked and develop an awareness of the scope of a crisis situation. Additionally, this process of reframing provides an opportunity for one to “see new possibilities and become more versatile and effective in their responses” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 5). According to Goldman and Smith (1991), the model is especially appropriate for understanding schools considering the explicit human resource orientation involved in an educational institution, the extensive meanings associated with educational issues, the intensity of external environmental influences, and the blanket of bureaucracy built
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

within the educational system. Therefore, in order to promote a better understanding of the organization’s response to a crisis, this reframing model seems most appropriate.

Research Questions

Although there is a substantial amount of research pertaining to crisis response in for-profit institutions, research is limited in not-for-profit, public educational institutions in crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). Such events can have a traumatic effect on the school community, directly or indirectly affecting students, teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders; an educational institution’s response can minimize the impact of such a crisis (Whitla, 2003). In order to better understand the impacts of a natural disaster on an educational community, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the structural frame?
2. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the human resource frame?
3. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the symbolic frame?
4. What insights can be gained about crisis leadership in a public school setting through the political frame?

Methodology

This study was a qualitative research attempt to understand the leadership decisions during a crisis situation in order to gain lessons learned that could be used to guide other public-school administrators the opportunity to be prepared. The study included (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (b) direct observations post facto; and (c)
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

document analysis concerning one public school district that experienced a major crisis that directly affected its students, staff, community, and stakeholders. The district is located in southwest Missouri and serves more than 7,400 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Although tornado activity is not uncommon in this region, this particular school district had not previously been directly impacted by an event of this magnitude.

Participants

The initial participants were purposefully selected and included various leaders and employees of the organization at the time of the crisis: (a) the superintendent, (b) the assistant superintendent, (c) the president of the school board, (d) the director of secondary administration, (e) the director of special services, (f) three principals who suffered both student and building loss, and (g) three teachers who lost both their home and their building in which they worked. The president of the school board did not respond to the request, and one of the employees who suffered both personal and professional loss chose not to participate. Therefore, the researcher interviewed an additional principal who lost an employee. The individual interviews ranged from 48 minutes to 75 minutes.

Data Collection and Procedures

Out of the 10 interviews, eight were conducted in person, one via written electronic communication, and one via a telephone interview. The semi-structured interview process, included open-ended questions related to the leaders’ roles during the crisis, their perceptions of institutional crisis readiness, their most meaningful experience during the event, and questions regarding decisions made within the structural, human
resource, political, and symbolic frame. This type of interview process provided flexibility and the opportunity to explore new ideas and differing perspectives as related to the crisis. Additionally, observations of press conferences and media interviews were conducted post facto using an observation guide (see Appendix B) created by the researcher to document common words and phrases and the organization’s response to the crisis. Finally, document analysis was utilized to analyze the language, words, and actions of the participants during and immediately after the crisis. The organizational and community documents included board minutes, meeting notes, official publications, reports, and newspaper accounts in order to understand the communication between the leaders and the educational institution’s stakeholders.

**Data Analysis**

A multi-level, interactive approach involving continual reflection and analytical questioning was used in order to analyze the data (Creswell, 2009). The data included field notes, transcripts, and multiple notations of documents. The interview data was transcribed and coded in order to identify common themes (Merriam, 2009). Once the common themes were identified, the final process involved categorizing each theme into one of the following frames as identified by the Bolman and Deal (2008) model in order to understand lessons that could be learned within each frame: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on one academic institution: Joplin Public Schools. The case study centered on developing an understanding of the leadership’s response to a particular event. According to Merriam (2009), the descriptive and heuristic
characteristics of case studies are an acceptable means for understanding a situation, event, program, or phenomenon. However, their particularistic nature limits the generalizability of the study to other institutions and administrators. Merriam (2009) stated the purpose of qualitative research is to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5), which is highly dependent upon the participants’ interpretations of an event or phenomenon. Likewise, researchers are also dependent upon their own interpretations of the data in order to develop patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, in reference to research methodology, this study may exhibit the same limitations as other qualitative studies in that it is highly contextual and based upon the interpretations of humans (Merriam, 2009).

**Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership decisions made during a crisis situation in order to gain lessons learned for other public school administrators. The four-frame perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008) was used to provide a framework for presenting the findings. Thus, the *lessons learned* will be presented within their respective frames.

**Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Structural Frame**

The structural perspective focuses on placing the right people in the right roles, which provide the opportunity for individuals and organizations to reach their goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The following are lessons within the structural frame that administrators learned through the process of responding to the crisis: (a) take time to
Take time to reflect. Reflection during crisis may sound like an oxymoron; but the moment will arise when there is a time for reflection. It may come in the sleepless moments in the middle of the night or in the earlier morning hours after a crisis, but taking time to reflect can make a significant difference in a leader’s ability to make effective decisions. The superintendent remembered that moment clearly.

I just got up again and started working again. Started figuring some things out. I really got my feet under me the next day. So, Monday morning when we got the leadership team together, that next day, I had an agenda and a game plan. That was really step one for us, planting a stake in the ground and saying, okay; here is our root, here is our current reality. How are we going to get from here to where we need to be?

This time of reflection allowed the leader to consider the emerging needs as well as the current strengths and weaknesses of his leadership team. Identifying those elements created a better opportunity to plan effectively. For example, the superintendent explained that one might assume that the Chief Financial Officer would handle all of the issues involved with acquiring facilities and creating lease agreements, but in this situation, the decision was different. With multiple building and land acquisitions to be made in an area where one-third of the community was destroyed, these duties were best left in the hands of a person with strengths in negotiation. Taking the time to reflect upon the unique situation and the strengths of his followers helped guide the superintendent in the planning process.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

All four building leaders indicated the value of reflection on an emotional level. Three building administrators acknowledged the humility involved in sitting across the table from people from all over the nation offering donations and support. As one of the leaders reflected on the experience that day, he remembered asking himself if he would do the same for someone else, someday. Another administrator reflected on the impact of their students’ reactions when they saw their administrator and assistant administrator coming down the street on bicycles to check on their status. The students were ecstatic to see them, and it was an emotional moment for those involved. These moments of reflection during the time of crisis seemed to have a significant impact on the leaders and how they responded to the needs of their followers.

**Sacrifice time to meet with the leadership team.** In a moment of crisis, time is precious. Not everyone will understand the importance of putting things on hold in order to gather the team together. In the Joplin Schools crisis, the superintendent met with the leadership team daily. This proved to be an essential part of the response and recovery process. He stated the following:

We met two hours every day. And, actually, they [meaning his followers] would tell you the same thing, it was probably one of the smartest things we ever did because it made sure we weren’t doubling up on responsibilities. Someone would come up against a roadblock and somebody else on the team would have a solution that could help with that. So, we actually became tremendously more efficient during that time.

One of the leaders on the team spoke of this time as being a catalyst; people were able to find purpose quickly and avoid that sense of helplessness. Another leader shared the
value of being together in order to prioritize and strategize as a leadership team. She made the following comment:

Daily communication was critical. In that situation, the fact that the leadership team met every single morning to talk about what happened yesterday, and decide what the plan was for today; because that was the pace we were at; it was important.

**Be ready to hire help.** The findings revealed the necessity to hire help in a few specific areas that are often not viewed as necessary in normal educational operations. The following comment from a leader below reveals the need for increased support in the area of administrative assistants, legal experts, and public relation specialists.

I wished we had hired a secretarial type person to be there to take notes for every single meeting, no matter what kind of meeting it was. Because it was like later on, FEMA and SEMA were asking for documentation that we may or may not have had because filing and keeping papers organized and all of that was not a luxury that we had.

Furthermore, the school leaders had never worked this extensively with federal or state emergency organizations and/or insurance agencies. As expected, these organizations had their own language and way of doing business that was often unfamiliar to the educational leaders. The superintendent noted that hiring experts was a necessity:

One thing we learned was the importance of bringing in experts. We hired a legal team to be our experts in working with FEMA and SEMA, and hired another group to be our experts in insurance and those guys had to work together a ton. But, that was definitely money well spent because normal leadership would’ve
taken over and would’ve done some things that wouldn’t have been reimbursable and would’ve cost the district.

In times of crisis, communication is critical. Not only was it important to provide information to the stakeholders, but also it was essential to guard sensitive information. Since deaths were involved in this crisis situation, the school district had to take extra care to guard sensitive information. Measures were quickly put in place to communicate who was allowed to communicate with the media. One of the building leaders revealed the following in response to the media frenzy.

It was one PR thing after another. I was not; nobody is ready for that. You had to get in the mode of, what are you going to say? And, we weren’t equipped as a school district to have a public relations team to be able to field all that.

Findings from the press conferences and local news reports confirmed the controlled response to media. Status of staff and students’ well being was withheld until the proper state authorities had made their official announcements. Only after the official statements were made did the superintendent comment publicly on the loss of a child or employee associated with the school district.

**Be prepared to extend educational services.** In the Joplin tornado situation, the regular school year ended two weeks early, but the district had to find a way to provide summer school in addition to repairing and rebuilding facilities. Children needed a safe place to be; their town was in disarray with debris still lining the streets and their parents needed their children to have a place to go. Adding to the chaos, many families were left temporarily without transportation. One leader communicated the necessity of extending
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

the regular summer school session and providing transportation, an option not usually
available in a summer school budget:

We extended summer school that year to two full months, and then I went right on
back to work…. We had to keep them [students] longer because their parents had
to go talk to FEMA, SEMA., and Red Cross, and they’ve got to go find
toothbrushes; and so I said, they’ve got to have their kids somewhere.

Another leader made the following commented:

Summer school. That was huge… Getting them out from under mom and dad’s
feet. And, I don’t think people realized how big of a lift it was to do summer
school, and provide busing when we had never provided busing before, and trying
to keep kids with their neighborhood schools.

Create a plan to receive resources. The superintendent revealed two areas
where educational institutions could be better prepared to receive resources. The first
area involved receiving monetary donations:

Cash is king.... It’s easier to manage than anything else. When you put together
your crisis plan, make sure you open an account with the bank that you do
business with, have a credit card account so people can donate directly to it. Put
one dollar in it but make sure there’s an account so that whenever that happens,
you can flip the switch and turn that thing on so people have a way that they can
donate money immediately if they want to help.

Another area of need realized by the leaders was the receiving of non-monetary
donations. When the crisis happened, people from all over the nation wanted to help.

Truckloads of supplies and busloads of volunteers arrived within hours. The
superintendent quickly realized they needed a plan to receive non-monetary donations as seen in the following comment:

The central distribution center; I had no intention. The only thing that they had ever taught me in college classes to become an administrator related to dealing with disasters, was to not create a central distribution center. But, people were dropping stuff off at our front door. And, people were coming to us for stuff, and we had no system in place to deal with it. So, we had to create a central distribution center.

During and immediately after the crisis, thousands of volunteers came to help. One of the leaders in the administration building who was assigned to oversee the volunteers commented, “We never turned away a volunteer and we had thousands of them, but someone has to oversee them.” The decision was made early in the crisis response to assign a specific contact person for volunteers. This allowed the district to place volunteers in the most needed areas. Additionally, the volunteer hours could be documented for future reimbursement from FEMA and SEMA.

**Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Human Resource Frame**

The human resource perspective focuses on meeting the needs of the stakeholders, which can improve individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The following are lessons within the human resource frame that administrators learned through the process of responding to the crisis: (a) administration can under communicate, but they cannot over communicate; and (b) emotional support services are essential.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Administration can under communicate, but they cannot over communicate.

The school district relied upon multiple sources to communicate to its stakeholders. As is typical in natural disasters, the infrastructure supporting communication was damaged, limiting the ability to communicate. In this particular crisis, cell phone use was severely limited. Therefore, according to the superintendent, the district resorted to using the local radio and television stations, and social media to get information out to its stakeholders. He explained the extent of the communication in the following comment:

We used radio heavily. We talked to stakeholders, just not internal, but external so we used the radio a lot. KZRG was really helpful, and I was on there every week. The press releases, the way we were utilizing local media was really important, too in getting the word out. Internal memos, electronic mail, it was kind of just a full-court press approach with how we tackled the communication piece.

The findings revealed numerous accounts of school district announcements being distributed through a local radio station and the Joplin School’s Facebook page as early as May 23rd, a day after the tornado. Information communicated was initially related to the priority of accounting for students and staff, availability and locations of donated food and supplies, and school contact information for stakeholders. Multiple students and families replied to the Facebook posts indicating their status, and several commented on how they had been personally contacted by their child’s principal within hours of the tornado. Later on in the summer, announcements revolved around volunteer and fund raising opportunities to help the teachers and students prepare for school.
Emotional support services are essential. The school district, with the help of FEMA, was able to employ several emotional support counselors to serve its staff and students. In addition, the staff was trained on how to detect struggling students and colleagues. The assistant superintendent made the following comment:

We did a lot of training over the summer, even with the principals, on what to watch for. I remember specifically setting a goal of no suicides of student or staff. And, I will never forget making it through the last day of school and just thinking, we made it.

The building leaders and teachers interviewed who lost their buildings commented on the value of the emotional support services provided to the district. The building leaders appreciated the extra support provided to their staff since they were often consumed with preparing the temporary facilities to accommodate students. The teachers interviewed appreciated having someone to support them in their own recovery process as well as to help support their students.

Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Political Frame

The political perspective focuses on the ongoing competition between individual and group interests (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The following are lessons within the political frame that administrators learned through the process of responding to a crisis: (a) build coalitions before a crisis; and (b) use political pull.

Build coalitions before a crisis. As with most school districts across the United States, in 2010, Joplin Schools was bracing for the effects of federal educational initiatives and financial challenges sure to affect the local public school system. Just
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

three years prior, the Joplin School District had been successful in passing a 57.3 million dollar bond to renovate two facilities, a middle school and special services facility, and construct two new middle schools. However, just as the 2007 bond initiatives were being completed in late 2009, the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis began to impact public educational funding. The district had prepared for the impact of the financial crisis and reduced state funding, but understood it would be lean times for the district. With the goals of passing a future building project, building coalitions had been a top priority. The district had spent considerable time going to ribbon cuttings and meeting community organization leaders and business owners face to face creating a strong network of support unaware of the how important these coalitions would be in the upcoming years. The superintendent commented the following:

We had the relationships in place, not knowing that we were going to need them in that capacity. Knowing the city manager, knowing the Chamber of Commerce president, knowing various CEO’s in the community, and having those trusting relationships in advance of the disaster was the best thing we did in preparing for that.

Another leader commented, “I’m glad I had those connections and knew those people, and I was not dealing with strangers in a crisis.” Findings of strong community ties were also evidenced by the membership of the Joplin School Board at the time of the tornado. Document analysis revealed a board membership with extensive community connections including members connected to a local construction companies, the local utility company, and other commercial service providers.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Use political pull. In the crisis situation, there were opportunities to give and get. The comments below exhibit how the superintendent was not only able to take advantage of the resources offered by those with the power, but he was also able to use his power to help others.

When you get a phone call on your cell phone from the United States Secretary of Education, just out of the blue, and now I got that connection. They were bringing some resources to the table; they hooked me up with the right people in the right departments.

On the other hand, the superintendent commented the following:

If people weren’t doing what they were supposed to be doing or following up on promises that were made, I had no problem picking up the phone and giving them the what-for about what they were doing and how it was impacting the big picture in our building and in achieving what we were trying to achieve.

The high school leader remembered the challenges associated with acquiring a facility large enough to house 1,200 juniors and seniors. He recalled the process consuming three weeks of their allotted 87 days, creating extremely tight construction schedules. He also spent numerous hours using his own political pull to negotiate with the local college and city parks in order to accommodate sports activities for his students.

Lessons Learned about Crisis Leadership in a Public School Setting Through the Symbolic Frame

The symbolic perspective focuses on the idea that symbols mediate the meaning of work and anchor culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The following are lessons within the symbolic frame that administrators learned through the process of responding to the
crisis: (a) provide an opportunity to create meaning; and (b) create a vision and sense of urgency.

**Provide an opportunity to create meaning.** The district and its leaders took great measures to create meaning out of tragedy. Opportunities were made available for staff to participate in gatherings in order to interact with and provide support to their colleagues, ceremonies were arranged to say goodbye to buildings that many staff considered their second home, and staff photos in front of the damaged buildings provided a sense of closure. One of the teachers interviewed commented the following:

> We went over there one day and kind of just walked it and had our group picture taken. That was really an emotional day, because that was home.

T-shirts with sayings of hope and inspiration and old bricks recovered from the tornado-damaged buildings were provided to the staff as symbols of hope and recovery. One artist from out of state provided Joplin Schools with several tree carvings of the school mascot, an eagle, to be placed in current and future buildings. These carvings had a significant impact on the healing process. One teacher affected both personally and professionally commented the following:

> That was just such a beautiful, beautiful way to take something devastating and make something beautiful. We used to drive by and watch them do the carvings, and that was meaningful.

Photos analyzed in the study revealed substantial evidence of school community gatherings including instances where staff gathered at ceremonies to honor those lives lost in the tragedy.
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Create a vision and sense of urgency. The superintendent made a critical decision early in the response and recovery: Joplin Schools would start school on time for the next academic school year. This vision provided a sense of purpose and direction as seen in the following comments from some of his followers.

If we didn’t have the mission, if we didn’t have a purpose, at the time, I think I can speak for myself, I would have floundered, I would have said, what are we doing?

Another leader commented the following:

When the superintendent said we are starting school on time, that was the call, that was the commitment, that was the banner, and so everyone knew what we were fighting for.

Two leaders commented how the decision was genius, while one leader admitted that he might of set the target closer to mid September. Yet, the leader quickly commented:

“Well, on time brings it up another notch!”

A countdown clock was placed at the district’s command center, documenting the days, hours, minutes, and seconds until the school district would reopen. The countdown clock was often in the background of press conferences, interviews, and photos adding to the sense of urgency. Several leaders commented that the pressure was on, and that the sense of urgency permeated throughout the different levels of leadership and into the community.

Discussion

Organizations are vulnerable and are increasingly susceptible to diverse catastrophic events. These events, or crises, have the potential to impact stakeholders and
organizations on multiple levels including, but not limited to, financial loss, reputational damage, injuries and/or deaths, structural or property damage, environmental damage (Coombs, 2012), and psychological damage (Whitla, 2003). However, careful planning and attention to stakeholders can mitigate the impact of a crisis (Cavanaugh, 2006). This exploratory study, with its emphasis on open-ended interviewing, elicited a wealth of rich descriptive data about how the leadership responded to the crisis revealing several lessons learned that may help other public school administrators address the needs of their stakeholders during a crisis.

When considering the crisis from a structural perspective, leaders realized the importance of taking time to reflect about the task of placing the right people in the right roles. Additionally, leaders were able to acknowledge their need to restructure and put new systems in place to fit the current organizational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Hiring expert help, extending the educational services of the district, and creating a process to manage both monetary and non-monetary donations were just a few of the key findings in the study. Under the human resource frame, additional lessons were learned. Leaders recognized the organization’s responsibility to serve their stakeholder’s needs. They placed high priority on frequent and clear communication and provided emotional support to their staff and students. These measures mitigated further crises and promoted the process of recovery.

The political frame, often seen as a negative aspect in the educational community, played an essential role in that coalitions built within the community prior to the crisis provided the necessary support and connections to improve the district’s ability to respond to the crisis. The superintendent was able to use his newly created state and
federal coalitions to help his stakeholders navigate their own crises. This finding is consistent with other research identifying that organizations who create a network of relationships increase their ability to be sensitive to operations, resilient, and to see the big picture (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Additionally, as realized by the Joplin Schools leadership team, strong relations before and during a crisis between an organization and local emergency management teams can pay major dividends in the response and recovery operations (Cavanaugh, 2006).

The symbolic frame focuses on how symbols and symbolic actions as part of everyday life are particularly perceptible in times of uncertainty and ambiguity (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Often times, people desiring to find direction, hope, and faith create symbols. These symbols mediate the meaning of work, thereby anchoring an organization’s culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). According to Mitroff (2005), people hold a set of assumptions such as the world is safe and secure, good and just, stable and predictable, and that crises are rare and limited in scope. When an event violates these assumptions, it can have a traumatic effect perpetuating the questioning of one’s entire belief system (Mitroff, 2005). Individuals experiencing a traumatic event need an opportunity to express their emotions and feelings in order to accelerate their recovery (Whitla, 2003). The district leadership was able to provide stakeholders various opportunities to create meaning out of a catastrophic situation by offering opportunities for the school community to come together in the form of gatherings, ceremonies, and staff meetings. T-shirts, staff photos, tree-carved eagles, and even salvaged bricks symbolized hope for the future. The carefully crafted vision elicited a sense of urgency that not only brought the community together, but prompted people from all over the
nation to help one school district, in the middle of the United States, to get their children back in school, *on time*, and in facilities safe and secure for learning to continue.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

This study was limited to the findings of one school district that experienced a catastrophic natural disaster and further limited by the three-month timeframe of the response to the crisis. Further studies could include multiple districts that have experienced a similar crisis extending the timeframe to encompass the long-term recovery process. Studies could also include other types of crisis and the leadership’s response since educational institutions experiences a variety of crisis situations on a daily basis. Finally, there is value in hearing the stories of leaders and stakeholders who experience a crisis. They bring a depth of understanding that can only truly be expressed in real conversations about crisis response and recovery. Further studies, engaging leaders and stakeholders that have survived a similar crisis of this magnitude could provide other valuable lessons enabling other leaders to be better prepared for the inevitable.
References


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Management Association.


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


CHAPTER SIX

SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

How has the dissertation influenced your practice as an educational leader?

Throughout the doctorate program, I convinced myself that I would complete a quantitative dissertation. I like facts and numbers; they are so concrete. I remembered thinking: quantitative dissertations were the only real dissertations. However, the doctoral program required students to present papers using all three types of research including qualitative research, and I began to understand and value the significance of telling a story. However, I was hesitant to take on the story of the Joplin Schools’ catastrophic tornado for two reasons: I did not know how to make it a realistic project, and even more concerning was the idea that I would be forced to revisit one of the most difficult times in my personal life. As I would soon discover, revisiting the photos and the videos of the tornado damage would be challenging enough; but to listen to the two precious teachers who lost their home and workplace tell their story of survival and perseverance was heart wrenching.

I would have to admit that a few of my colleagues are responsible for encouraging me to entertain the topic. In our many hours together discussing dissertation topics, they insisted I had to tell the story. As I began to wrap my mind around the topic and discuss it with my advisor, I received even more support. Finally, as I approached the prospective participants, the response was overwhelming—it was an important topic that needed to be explored. And so it began, the process of working with my advisor to make the dissertation manageable, and the process of preparing myself to revisit the most catastrophic event I had ever witnessed.

As I reflect on the influence the dissertation has had on me as an educational leader, two specific thoughts resonate with me: the importance of meeting the needs of
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

stakeholders, and the power of vision. As I listened to the interviews and coded the data, each of these areas seemed to echo in my mind. Then, I realized that these are some of the key aspects of leading. They are not only essential during a crisis, but they are also a necessary component for creating a healthy organization. My goal is to understand these concepts so that I improve my ability to lead.

The human resource frame includes several assumptions including organizations exist to serve human needs; people and organizations need each other; and a good fit benefits both, while a bad fit causes suffering within both parties (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This reciprocating relationship was extremely visible throughout the study. The organization, having suffered such a catastrophic disaster, needed the help of its employees; one person, one team, one group was not enough to make recovery happen. The fact that the school district opened on time is a direct reflection of the impact employees had on meeting the organizational goals of the organization. Each leader interviewed clearly acknowledged that the employees and stakeholders of the organization made it happen; from the teachers that came in to make thousands of calls to confirm the status of students and families, to the thousands of volunteers who helped unpack the boxes in the temporary schools just hours before the it opened. Likewise, the engaging of employees and stakeholders’ talents met the needs of the people. The stakeholders needed to serve, and they were allowed to serve where their talents benefitted the organization the most.

How does this impact my leadership? Whether during a crisis or not, people need to be needed; they need to feel valued; and without an opportunity to meet those needs, they suffer. As a leader, I believe I understand more clearly the value meeting the needs
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

of others. This has been a running theme for me throughout the doctoral program since early on I discovered my tendency toward task completion. It is not that I did not build any relationships, but I did not see relationship building as an integral part of leadership. However, over the past few years, I have made a conscientious effort to build relationships within my organization; and this year I have seen a significant difference in my perception of others as well as their perception of me. For me, the key is to realize leadership development is a process. I will never reach pinnacle status of perfect leadership, but I can make improvements every day to be a better leader and meet the needs of others.

Another area the dissertation has influenced me is the power of a vision. During the crisis, the vision was clear—rebuild and start school on time. The vision of rebuilding propelled the community to join together and strive toward a common goal. As one leader expressed, “we all had a dog in the fight” since the majority of the community lost a home, business, workplace, or neighborhood school. I can remember that exactly one week after the tornado, Memorial Day, our superintendent was finally able to announce publicly, numbers of students and staff who had perished in the tornado. In his final moments of his speech he said, “today we are mourning; tomorrow we rebuild.” What a powerful statement. We needed to mourn, there had been so much loss; but we needed hope just as much, or we would just slip away into the sea of hopelessness.

Not surprisingly, these two aspects became extremely visible during the crisis, which made me ask—are they important now? The answer is a resounding yes. Meeting people’s needs and setting a direction for an organization are extremely important in the daily life of an organization; and now that the dust has settled, it is evident. We have
completed the mission, and we seem to be waiting, waiting for someone to tell us what to do. School board resignations and abrupt administrative changes have seemed to leave our school district without direction. We are in limbo; waiting to see where we can serve and which direction we will be led. And this, for me, illuminates the importance of meeting the needs of stakeholders and the essentiality of vision in the daily life of an organization. People need purpose and direction, and just as a leader commented in the study:

If we didn’t have the mission, if we didn’t have a purpose, at the time, I think I can speak for myself, I would have floundered. I would have said, what are we doing?

These powerful words from the dissertation process cause me to reflect upon the importance of leaders to instill a guiding purpose and direction for their organization.

**How has the dissertation process influenced you as a scholar?**

The dissertation process has influenced me as a scholar in two primary areas: the impact of research and my ability to write qualitative research. Although I came into the program skeptical of qualitative research, when I reflect on articles that impacted me the most during the doctoral process, they are often the qualitative pieces. This was extremely helpful when I began to write my own research. I was able to reflect back to several of those articles as a guideline on how I wanted to present my own article.

Research can have a significant impact. I remember reading the article *Privilege, Oppression, and Difference* by Allan Johnson for the first time early in the doctoral program. It changed my thinking, it prompted me to ask questions, and it made me want to read more. This continued throughout the dissertation process as I began to read about
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

crisis, crisis management, and organizational structures. The more I read, the more
questions I had, and the more I wanted to read. I wanted to understand how concepts
were connected, how researchers could create meaning and understanding, and how
research could present new ideas and concepts. The process of writing my own
dissertation helped me to understand how concepts were connected. For example, I was
able to see how meeting the needs of stakeholders within an organization was an essential
component of effective leadership. I was also able to see how I could take hundreds of
quotes from multiple sources and create a piece of work that may help others understand
the impact of a situation, and even make changes to their own crisis plans. I hope that my
research has the opportunity to change others just as research has changed me.

Secondly, the dissertation process has improved my ability to write at a scholarly
level. I can remember reading research in the beginning of the program and thinking to
myself, how can I ever write something like this? Yet, after reading an extraordinary
amount of research and analyzing the format of several of them, I believe I was able to
accomplish the task. I still have a stack of articles that have notes on them such as: good
format or nice findings section. They came in very handy when I set down to write my
own article. This practice of critically analyzing research and the process of reflecting
upon my own writing has made me a better and more confident writer.

Overall, the dissertation process was valuable. It helped me to learn key concepts
that changed me as a leader, as well as develop skills that changed me as a writer. I am
also thankful that I was able to be involved in a new concept of a dissertation process that
included a practitioner and scholarly piece. I feel more confident in my abilities to lead
and to present future works as the opportunities arise.
REFERENCES


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

http://www.joplinschools.org/domain/38


http://www.joplinschools.org/Page/93


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Management Association.


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Research and Theory, 7(2), 277-304.


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION


Appendix A

[School Letterhead]

Date:  

University of Missouri-Columbia  
Campus Institutional Review Board  
190 Galena Hall DC074  
Columbia, MO 65212  

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study entitled *Lessons Learned in a Crisis Situation: The Joplin School Story* presented by Jeri Goswick, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at Joplin Public Schools.

The purpose of the study is to document and analyze the Joplin Schools’ leadership response to the crisis on May 22, 2011. The primary activity will be interviewing select leaders. I expect that this project will end not later than May of 2016.

I understand that Jeri Goswick will receive individual consent for all participants. Any data collected by Jeri Goswick will be kept confidential.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,

Dr. Norman Ridder  
Joplin Schools  
Superintendent  
(417) 625-5200
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

University of Missouri-Columbia
Campus Institutional Review Board
190 Galena Hall DC074
Columbia, MO 65212

My name is Jeri Goswick, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program. I am completing my doctoral studies with a dissertation that will (when finished) document and analyze the Joplin Schools’ leadership response to the crisis on May 22, 2011, through the multiframe perspective of Bolman and Deal (2008). Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Purpose of the research: The purpose of the study is to conduct inquiry into how the administrators at Joplin Public Schools handled the crisis situation, as analyzed through the structural, political, human resource, and symbolic frames, in order to find clarity and meaning of the decisions made and offer lessons learned to other public school institutions that may experience a similar crisis.

What you will do in this research: As a participant in this study, you will be asked to allow the researcher to conduct a series of interviews regarding your experience during a crisis situation. Your responses will be recorded, but only so the researcher may transcribe your responses as accurately as possible for exact representation of our conversation. The participant, the researcher, and the researcher’s doctoral committee will be the only persons to have privilege to these interviews. The only alternative for which the tapes may be heard by anyone other than those listed is by written permission from you, the participant.

Time required: The interview will take approximately one hour. However, if more time is needed, or additional interviews are required, they can be scheduled at your convenience.

Risks: Little to no risks are anticipated.

Benefit: The benefits would include personal growth for each participant through opportunities for reflection and dialogue about his or her experience.

Confidentiality: Your individual responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. At no point do you have to allow your real name or title to be revealed if you so choose. A fictitious name may be used. With your written permission below, excerpts from the interview may be included in the dissertation or other later publications.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you
may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw by informing the researcher that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). In addition, you may skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

I truly appreciate your participation in this project. I want you to be as comfortable as possible during the process. If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact me, Jeri Goswick, at 417-438-9393 or at goswick3@yahoo.com. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Dr. Cindy MacGregor, MU-MSU EdD Site Coordinator, 417-836-6046, CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

**Agreement:**
The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Participant’s Name (print): ______________________________ Date_____________

Participant’s Signature: __________________________________ Date ____________

Researcher’s Signature: __________________________________ Date ____________
Appendix C

Interview Questions for Crisis Management and Leadership Study

Opening Questions
1. What was your position at Joplin Schools during and immediately following the May 22, 2011, crisis?
2. In your view, what is the single most important response in a crisis situation?
3. In your view, at the time of the crisis, to what degree was the institution prepared to respond.

Questions About Tornado Experience
1. What was your single most vivid memory of the May 22, 2011, tornado?
2. Discuss your personal and/or professional role on in response to the disaster?
3. In your view, what was unique about the Joplin crisis in comparison to what you may know or have experienced in other crises?
5. Tell me about your most meaningful personal or professional experience involving your role in the crisis response and recovery effort.

Leadership Questions
1. In your view, what are the three most important leadership attributes a leader must demonstrate during a crisis situation?
2. In your view, to what degree did Joplin Schools’ leadership demonstrate the identified attributes? Please include specific examples.
3. In your view, what specific actions, if any, did the organization take to develop individuals’ leadership skills in advance of the crisis.
4. In your view, was Joplin Schools adequately prepared to respond to a crisis situation of this magnitude?
5. In your view, what leadership lessons have you learned that might be helpful to others who might experience a similar situation?
6. In your view, how did the leadership approach change through the various phases of the immediate response and the long-term recovery effort?
7. If a similar crisis happened today, what leadership practices would be you recommend being done again, and what practices would you recommend being done differently?
8. As you reflect on the experience of the immediate crisis and recovery effort, do you recall any specific leadership strategies related to allocation and coordination of work efforts? To what degree do you believe these strategies impacted the crisis response and recovery effort? Why?
9. As you reflect on the experience of the immediate crisis and recovery effort, do you recall any specific leadership strategies related to engaging people’s talents in a way that also benefitted the organization? To what degree do you believe these strategies impacted the crisis response and recovery effort? Why?
10. As you reflect on the experience of the immediate crisis and recovery effort, do you recall any specific leadership strategies related to the balancing of resources and power?
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

To what degree do you believe these strategies impacted the crisis response and recovery effort? Why?
11. As you reflect on the experience of the immediate crisis and recovery effort, do you recall any specific leadership strategies related to resolving confusion, providing direction and hope, and uniting people? To what degree do you believe these strategies impacted the crisis response and recovery effort? Why?

Ending Question
1. Is there anything else you would like to share that might benefit the study?
### Observation Guide to be used for post facto audiovisual recording of leadership meetings, board meetings, and press conferences.

Date of observation:  
Time of observation:  
Archival Number:  

Date of originally recorded activity:  
Time of originally recorded activity:  
Purpose of original activity:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Interactions</th>
<th>Common Words and Phrases</th>
<th>Nonverbal Responses</th>
<th>Organization’s Decision Process and Final Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What types of interactions are happening between the participants at the meeting (friendly, serious, emotionally charged, supportive, etc.)?</td>
<td>Are there common words, phrase, or terminology used during the recorded observation?</td>
<td>Are nonverbal responses observed during the activity that provides a sense of the tone/atmosphere of the meeting?</td>
<td>Who starts the meetings? Does anyone dominate the conversation? What are the prevailing topics of the meeting? What types of final decisions are made?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Notes:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Document Guide to be used for
Date of document analysis:
Time of document analysis:
Archival Number:

Original date of document:
Original time of document:
Purpose of document:
Author of the document:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language or Tone of the Document</th>
<th>Common Words and Phrases</th>
<th>Topics Discussed or Decisions Made in the Document</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal? Informal? Serious? Encouraging? Directional? Etc.</td>
<td>Are there common words, phrases, or terminology used during the recorded observation?</td>
<td>What are the prevailing topics of the document? What types of final decisions are made or being discussed within the document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Notes:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
LESSONS LEARNED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

VITA

Jeri-ann Goswick was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1969. She was primarily raised in Missouri and Oklahoma. She earned a Bachelor of Science with an emphasis in Accounting from Missouri Southern State University, and later returned to complete a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish. After several years in accounting, she decided to pursue a career in teaching and completed a Master of Arts in Teaching and later a Master of Science in School Administration. A defense of the present dissertation will meet the remaining requirements for 2016 completion of a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis through the University of Missouri. She has taught language for 12 years, and currently teaches English as a Second Language for Joplin Public Schools. She is passionate about helping students and families with limited English. Her intended career trajectory is to work as a school administrator where she can use her experience of working with diverse families and her bilingual skills to create positive learning environment for all students.