

## **Critical care of community: responding to community needs in a crisis context**

Steering a large organisation with multiple stakeholders is complex and challenging on any given day, so how does one respond to the multiple, conflicting and complex needs of such an organisation in the midst of a global pandemic? How does a school uphold its moral imperative to provide clarity, certainty and stability to students and parents when the world around them is in a daily state of flux? Where does the role and responsibility of the school in this domain begin and end? In March 2020, as communities across the world were thrown into a state of chaos, these were the precise questions we faced at Loreto Normanhurst; our response in these moments of flux was key to ensuring our students and their parents remained as calm and assured as possible; the weight of this responsibility weighed heavily on the collective shoulders of our staff.

As a leadership team we were keenly aware that schools are institutions that provide structure and routine to families across the country, and mindful of the necessity of maintaining structural integrity during such times of turmoil. Now, as we are slowly emerging from the mire of March, what is beginning to crystallise for us as a community is that our common mission and values were key to our response to this crisis. Like any organisation, we grappled with the flood of information that we were navigating on a daily, and at times an hourly basis. In the midst of this avalanche of information, we knew that keeping sight of our core values and mission was essential for us if we were to retain a common sense of purpose in the midst of global chaos. At the core of the Loreto Normanhurst mission is a holistic approach, as we encourage each student's fulfilment of her academic and personal potential in an atmosphere of freedom, care and respect. It was this mission that was at the centre of our decision-making at every step of the crisis.

Back to the mire of March! As we made the decision to initially send our Boarding students home, and then, shortly after, to move the students of non-essential workers to our Virtual Learning Plan, we relied upon our existing technological platforms to provide our community with clarity and consistency. Our Virtual Learning Plan ensured that all student assessment and learning activities in the online platform were delivered via common Learning Management systems and zoom in a synchronous manner, as we were committed to maintaining our existing timetable for all students. The technological platforms we utilised were already in place within the school, and whilst we were aware that there had been previous gaps with teacher engagement with such platforms, it became an imperative that all staff were comfortable with utilising these platforms for their teaching practice in the remote context. As such, professional learning teams were mobilised within the school to provide support and intensive intervention at short notice. Time was provided for teachers to collaborate (albeit via zoom) on engagement with these systems and upskilling in responsive online pedagogies. Our staff were indeed required to be agile, and to pivot rapidly to a remote learning approach, however due to existing processes and ICT structures, we were able to respond effectively and efficiently. By ensuring that staff and students were comfortable with the platforms for online learning and had clarity

about our remote learning approach, we were able to then prioritise our mission, providing each student with equitable access to the learning experience in order to fulfil her academic potential, even in the midst of a crisis.

But what of our shared mission that each student is encouraged to meet her personal potential? How did we make sure that our students maintained healthy, robust and authentic relationships with their teachers and peers whilst engaging in a remote manner? In order to do this we had to also maintain existing pastoral care structures, whilst manipulating them to suit our remote environments. We ensured that students still had access to their Advisors and Tutors via zoom, as they continued to conduct 1:1 conversations and Tutor group meetings in order to maintain connection and demonstrate the imperative of nurturing human relationships in the domain of wellbeing. Whilst it was challenging for our teaching staff to navigate the prospect of engaging with students via zoom, the shared understanding that we have of our core mission ensured that teachers realised the necessity and importance of maintaining these structures.

What measures were established to charter these uncertain waters and steer an organisation the size of ours? Of paramount importance was the need for clear, consistent and accessible information for all stakeholders. Having a unified message and clear modes of communication was imperative. But one-way communication is not enough. As such, constant evaluation was crucial when engaging with our community and listening to their needs. Our people needed to feel heard and valued in the midst of a crisis, however as leaders we also needed to strike the right balance of listening without being too reactive. Fortunately we were in safe hands, as our community is formed in the Ignatian tradition and so we prioritise reflection and discernment, and as such we always endeavour to exist in this space of evaluation; now more than ever we are conscious that this space is crucial if we wish to be healthy, robust and to thrive as a community. Therefore, when responding to the crisis, we adopted an iterative process of evaluation, reflection and response, utilising the metaphor of an infinity loop to guide our path and listen to our community.

So is there a silver lining to our experience of this crisis? Indeed there must be if we are to emerge stronger and wiser. Our silver lining is this: we have experienced communal learning and growth, as our common values, structures and mission provided us with a platform that offered a stable pivot-point. Indeed, the Loreto Normanhurst community should be proud that we have built such platforms to lean upon during times of crisis; it is now time for us to celebrate this and emerge from the mire with pride and faith in our communal strength.

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