

# Critical incidents: effective responses and the factors behind them

An investigation into the factors that shape how leaders and teachers in school deal effectively with critical incidents and episodes

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

**Michael Mander**

Headteacher, Edge Hill Junior School, Burton on Trent

## Introduction: (Monday morning again)

*"If you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you...."* Kipling 'If' (Kipling, 1910)

*On arrival in the classroom following a breathless appeal by Katie from Year 4, I witnessed Ben crawling on all fours under the table growling and biting anyone who came within range. "I've tried everything but he bit me" Mrs 'T' said showing me the bite marks on her hand. Ben had recently arrived at the school and we had no idea of his tendency to imitate with great accuracy the hunting prowess of the King of the beasts. I surveyed the scene deciding what to do as Ben continued to crawl around snapping at imaginary wildebeest. Just my luck I thought I haven't prepared my assembly and the inspectors are due at 10 o'clock. Why do things always happen together?*

Colleagues in school are not often faced with incidents as challenging as this, although they are not uncommon.

In schools however, we are frequently faced with problems, accidents and incidents that have to be contained, managed and resolved. These incidents can place considerable pressure on those involved in dealing with them personally, or on those leading others who have to deal with them.

## What is a critical incident?

Incidents happen all the time, but it is important to note that these 'incidents' only become 'critical incidents' (CI) when the individuals involved attach a particular significance to them:

*'Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident'* (Tripp, 1993, p.8)

A critical incident (CI) by its very nature can cause an emotional response and is subject, time and context specific. In other words, what comprises a critical incident is different for different people even in the same situation and this can change for the same person depending on what has gone before.

The context in which one works can also have an impact on how one manages and reacts to critical incidents. Are there systems and support within school that enable staff to cope with CI? Critical Incidents can be good or bad and can inform how we deal with subsequent similar or dissimilar CI. Chell (1998) describes a Critical Incident as a significant occurrence (event, incident, process or issue) identified by the respondent.

Some colleagues appear to be more adept, prepared and willing to deal with such incidents effectively. They seem to have qualities and have developed strategies and support mechanisms that enable them to cope more effectively with these challenging situations.

## The Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is used by different training bodies including NCSL as a reflective tool in leadership training. The technique used involves:

1. Describing an incident from your recent professional experience. This could be annoying, inspiring, thought provoking or typical.
2. Suggesting an explanation within the immediate context.
3. Asking questions that delve deeper into the meaning behind the incident, eg different ways of thinking about it; exploring the dilemma, and considering personal theories and values, which influence that judgement.
4. Considering the implications that this has for future practice?

(Adapted from Tripp, 1993)

Tripp (1993) suggests that by focusing our attentions on such incidents in a structured and analytical way, we can develop our own 'grounded theory' ie explanations based on the collection and analysis of data. Used collaboratively and as part of action research (data gathering, wider reflection, action and evaluation) teachers could develop increased understanding and control over professional judgements.

Schools have policies and organisational structures that can be used to deal with minor incidents and major incidents. Sarna (1994) uses a three stage model of critical incident management that expands this idea. The course of each critical incident, whether it is a minor incident or a major disaster, can be described in terms of this three stage model.

1. Response phase (threat, evaluation and containment)
2. Resolution phase (contingency management)
3. Recovery phase (restoration of normality)

An additional phase – ‘Identification’, can be added to these. This is shaped by life history, personality, values and beliefs, and may explain why some colleagues are more adept, prepared and/or willing to deal with such incidents even if they haven’t had experience of using the critical incident technique as a reflective tool. They seem to have qualities and have developed strategies and support mechanisms that enable them to cope more effectively with these challenging situations.

## Suggested Coping Strategies

There are certain techniques and skills that can be developed and improved through training that help one to deal with critical incidents in whatever form they come. Flin (1996 :37) has argued that there are three skills common to individuals who deal with critical incidents effectively. These are being able to cope with stress; decision making and team management. Whilst I agree with these and accept that they may be necessary skills to enable one to evaluate, respond, contain and resolve (Sarna 1994) a critical incident, I would like to argue that one’s capacity and willingness to deal with these effectively is underpinned by qualities and values that are far deeper and more difficult to isolate and improve through training activities.

These include:

- Self-awareness: the ability to recognise one’s emotions and drives as well as their effect on others.
- Self-regulation: the ability to re-direct or control negative and disruptive moods.
- Motivation: a passion to work from reasons beyond recognition or reward.
- Empathy: the ability to understand the emotional intelligence and make up in other people.
- Social skills: being proficient in managing relationships and networks.

Interestingly, these have been highlighted as five components of emotional intelligence (EQ), (Goleman 1998, West-Burnham 2002, 2003)

It can also be argued that the ability to cope with stress effectively underpins one’s capacity to make clear appropriate decisions and manage teams effectively. Furthermore, these qualities and values are informed and developed, depending on one’s personality, life experiences and influences.

## Research Based Strategies

In order to explore this hypothesis, research was conducted in five primary schools involving in depth life history interviews, personality assessments and analysis of critical incident journals. From this research a number of coping strategies are suggested below:

- Sharing CI that are experienced at different levels of the hierarchy might be a useful strategy in developing an organisation’s capacity, by creating a portfolio of CI and what has been learnt from dealing with them, using the CIT outlined above.
- Ensuring school has policies and procedures for dealing with CI using the response, recovery and resolution cycle suggested above.
- Establishing and supporting a professional and personal mentor programme that supports staff throughout their career.
- Enabling and supporting staff through professional development to develop an understanding of their personalities and how they work.
- Adopting some of the work-life balance activities currently advocated by some LA might also be useful.

Developing a scheme to identify a professional mentor either within ones own school or one who stays with an individual throughout their career. This would be problematic to establish but not impossible.

- Take time to carry out a review of CI each term and identify what has been/can be learnt from it. Experiencing and coping with a CI or CE effectively builds up ones immunity/resilience to their effect (like an illness) and helps to develop ones capacity to cope initially and afterwards. Therefore protecting individuals from CI might not always be beneficial to the individual or organisation.
- A sense of self-efficacy can be encouraged through a supportive professional development programme where staff have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to work effectively.

*'I try to walk to a problem. It is never as bad as it first seems'*  
(HT Org c)

- Reading and hearing about other people's CI and CE's and how they dealt with them either positively or negatively can be helpful in a number of ways:

*'One of the things I have learnt from all this is to give yourself time to stop and think.'* (HT Org a)

Resolving problems, emergencies, critical incidents, etc are a daily challenge for leaders in school. Sometimes these incidents are so critical that they place considerable pressure on those involved with them. At other times they are small, often insignificant, but their cumulative effect can be equally challenging. Providing strategies and support mechanisms to help teachers deal with these would arguably help them to develop increased understanding and control over professional and personal judgements.

## Conclusion

This inquiry set out to show that there may be links between life experiences, personality and how one copes with critical incidents and critical episodes.

The suggestions and arguments forwarded need to be considered in light of the fact that the sample involved was relatively small. Despite this, the suggested strategies will hopefully strike a chord of credibility and will be worthwhile to those interested in this area of work.

Resolving problems, emergencies or critical incidents are daily challenges for leaders in schools. Sometimes these incidents are so critical that they place considerable pressure on those involved with them. Schools have acknowledged this and have developed policies and procedures in order to manage such occurrences. However, at other times these incidents are small and often insignificant, but their cumulative effect can be equally challenging. Recognising this and providing strategies and support mechanisms to help teachers deal with these issues would arguably help them to develop increased understanding and control over professional and personal judgements.

## References

- Chell, E, 1998, Critical Incident Technique in Symon, G and Cassell, C, 1998 *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in organisational Research*, Thousand Oaks, Sage
- Flin, R, 1996, *Sitting in the Hot Seat: Leaders and Teams for Critical Incident Management*, West Sussex, John Wiley & Sons Ltd
- Golman, 1995, *Emotional Intelligence*, New York, Bantam Books
- Kipling, R, 1910, *'Brother Square Toes' Rewards and Fairies*. MacMillan Uniform Edition
- Sarna, P, 1984, Training Police Commanders and Supervisors in the management of critical incidents, *Washington Crime News Service, Training Aids Digest*, 9 (12) pp 1-6.
- Tripp, D, 1993, *Critical Incidents In Teaching: Developing professional Judgement*, London and New York, Routledge
- Tripp, D, 1994, Teachers Lives, Critical Incidents and Professional Practice, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol 7, No: 1, pp 65 -76.
- West-Burnham, J, 2003, Understanding the Effective Leadership Team. In NAHT, 2003, *Leadership Teams. Primary Leadership, Paper 9*, West Sussex, NAHT

## Research associate reports available in summer 2008

### ■ **School Business Managers: their role in distributed leadership**

How can SBMs/Bursars compliment and support  
distributed leadership

Mark Aldridge, *Financial Controller, Hockerill  
Anglo-European College, Hertfordshire*

### ■ **Keep your head**

Governor perspectives on co-headship as part  
of succession planning

Nicola Allan, *Headteacher, Colleton Primary School,  
Twyford*

### ■ **Mission Possible: strategies for managing headship**

How can the role of headship be made possible,  
maintaining a headteacher's energy and enthusiasm?

Deb Halliday-Bell, *Lound Junior School, Sheffield*

Dorcas Jennings, *North Wingfield Primary School, Chesterfield*

Martin Kennard, *Bunny CE Primary School, Nottinghamshire*

Jane McKay, *Hall Orchard CE Primary School, Leicestershire*

Heather Reid, *Scotter Primary School, Lincolnshire*

Nigel Walter, *Gainsborough Charles Baines Community  
Primary School, Lincolnshire*

### ■ **Thinking Ahead**

Exploring the strategic role that headteachers and  
governors carry out in partnership

Gilly Harwood-Smith, *Leadership Consultant, School  
Improvement Partner and former headteacher, Downton  
Primary School*

### ■ **Deal or no big deal?**

Schools responses to the introduction of Teaching  
and Learning Responsibility allowances

Jon Howard-Drake, *Headteacher, The Misbourne Arts and  
Technology Combined Specialist College, Great Missenden*

### ■ **Under the microscope**

Leading in a climate of close public scrutiny

Hilary Macaulay, *Principal, West London Academy, Ealing*

### ■ **United we stand**

A soft federation model for small primary schools

Jo Williams, *Headteacher, Wilson's Endowed CE Primary  
School, Over Kellet, Carnforth, Lancashire*

## Research Associate Programme

Published: June 2008

To download this publication, please visit  
**[www.ncsl.org.uk/publications](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/publications)**

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:  
**[www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates)**

**National College for  
School Leadership**  
Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0845 609 0009  
F: 0115 872 2001  
E: [enquiries@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

### Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.