

**Hurricane Michael Followed by Covid: A Case Study on the Aftermath of Two Tragic Events at a High School in the Florida Panhandle.**

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## **Introduction**

Cottdale High school belongs to a vibrant town in Jackson County, Florida. It is one of 7 schools to educate 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade students within the district. The geography and population consist of 955 square miles of land with a population close to 48,000 people, respectively. Jackson County, established in 1822, is proud of its rural “quiet way of life” and ample natural resources of which they are thankful to steward. Agriculture, timber, and conservation are the primary uses of the county's land. Residents of the county have access to six different springs, over 150,000 acres of wetlands, and a popular cave system for entertainment. Prior to Hurricane Michael, the county experienced a 2.1% decline in population from the 2010 census. This gives a picturesque insight into what Jackson County was like prior to October 10, 2018 (Jackson County Board of County Commissioners, 2019).

Two days prior to Hurricane Michael making land fall on October 7, 2018, Tropical Storm Michael appeared on the National Hurricane Centers radar. The tropical storm was in the western Caribbean just south of Cozumel, Mexico. Within 24 hours, the storm had grown into a hurricane. As the storm worked its way up the coast, the storm grew stronger. By evening of October 9<sup>th</sup>, the storm passed the threshold of a category-3 hurricane and was directly in line to hit Bay County Florida (Leigh, 2019). With the storm initially rated as a category-4 hurricane, residents of Jackson County began to prepare as best they could for what would be the strongest hurricane to make landfall on the Florida Panhandle. Cottdale High school is roughly 70 miles inland from the coast and has traditionally never been greatly affected by any storm to land on the coast until Hurricane Michael.

This was not the only devastating event to fall upon Cottdale High school within a brief period. In January 2020, the corona virus (Covid-19) was discovered in multiple countries throughout the world. By March, the unthinkable was set in motion. Schools across the United States began to close with little knowledge of what the future held. Many schools began to transition to online learning for the remainder of the spring semester as infection rates continued to grow. Community members quickly lost hope and motivation and teachers struggled to know what was best for their students.

## **Overview/Analysis**

The early evening of October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael made landfall at Mexico Beach, Florida around 5:30 p.m. as a category 5 hurricane. This storm then proceeded across the state arriving at Cottdale Florida as a Category 4 hurricane with wind speeds of 155 mph and continued across the state moving northeast into South Georgia. Although Michael was a fast-moving storm, severe damage impacted the residents of Cottdale, Florida (Burlaw, 2018). For some, it destroyed their homes. For others, homes were not lost, but they sustained severe damage. Some lost potential savings from their tree plots that were blown down during the storm. These savings were set aside as retirement funds for the elderly, college tuition funds for the youth, emergency funds for others, etc. Plots that were bringing in two hundred dollars an acre prior to Hurricane Michael were lucky to bring in twenty dollars per acre after the storm.

To paint a financial picture of the loss, if you had ten acres of trees prior to the storm you had potential earnings of two thousand dollars; after the storm you would be lucky to make two hundred for the same acreage. For this case study, we will focus on the effects this storm had on the students and teachers who are members of the Cottondale FFA program within Jackson County.

Stan Scurlock, current FFA Advisor and a school-based agriculture educator (SBAE), helps paint a picture of his experiences dealing with the aftermath of the storm. One of the positive experiences that Stan experienced was when Central Florida's agriculture programs gathered fencing supplies, animal feed, and other needed goods and had them delivered to Cottondale and the surrounding area to help fellow FFA members. One primary concern for Stan was the condition of the homes his students were living in. As a bus driver for the school, he often saw homes with tarps draped over them as an effort to keep out the harsh Florida elements: wind, rain, heat, humidity, and bugs. Stan considered some of the homes he saw to be unsafe for his students to live in, but because of socio-economic obstacles, families were forced to remain. Some of the families that evacuated to stay safe, decided to never return. He figures that fifty to sixty students either never came back after the storm or had to move during the aftermath. The direct results of so many individuals moving after the storm were felt at Cottondale High School. That translates to twelve percent of the school not returning to classes after the Hurricane. These numbers represent family, friends, and neighbors who had to leave their lifestyles, homes, and communities due to the damage attributed to Hurricane Michael.

Stan spoke of some challenges he faced after the storm clean-up and recovery had begun, and with school starting nearly three weeks later, he said, "Students just didn't really have a reason or desire to be in school." He stated, "Some were coming from homes that were still damaged, others had trees that needed to be cut and removed from their properties, so focusing on the curriculum was a challenge." Another obstacle students faced was the neighborhoods surrounding the school were already considered to be financially challenged, so having a huge storm come through the community made an already difficult situation harder. Stan saw and continues to see students have less of a desire to graduate even now three years after the storm passed through Jackson County. Damage to the county could still be seen while driving through the area. Tree branches scattered the side of the roads, homes still had tarps covering them, etc. Residents of Jackson County, while still recovering from the storm, were about to be hit with what would be the second catastrophic event to ravage this community.

January 2020, the novel corona virus (Covid-19) made its debut on the world map as it was discovered in multiple countries throughout the world. Fear and the unknown grasped the hearts of the world as this new and mysterious virus began to cross borders throughout the world infecting individuals at an alarming rate as recorded by The Center for Disease Control (CDC) (CDC, 2019). The CDC had very little data collected on the new virus adding to the alarm as hospitals began to fill and oxygen and respirators became a scarce commodity. By March 2020, all schools within Jackson County, along with much of the United States of America had shut down. Many school districts initially thought the shutdown of schools would last only a few weeks, but as infection rates climbed, local officials and the board of education for Jackson

County decided to keep schools closed and transition to online learning for the rest of the spring semester ending May 27, 2020 (Jackson County School Board, 2020).

This transition created a ripple effect on the students and faculty at Cottondale High school. All dances and sporting events were cancelled due to the risk of potential exposure these activities inherently created. In addition to the cancelation of most social events, seniors of the 2020 class had to move their graduation ceremony online. The Covid-19 pandemic took away many of the passions and essential social time secondary students enjoyed participating in. Managing classes was not the only challenge for many students. Many individuals with parents working “essential jobs” were required to care for younger siblings and help them complete their homework and online classes as well.

Stan Scurlock spoke of the experiences of his students as they adjusted to a new educational world created by the Covid-19 pandemic. “Students were already struggling to find motivation in school after the hurricane,” stated Stan. “Now they were forced to stay home without the motivation of an in-person connection to a teacher or peers which took away their drive for learning even more.” Stan found when the school year opened in the Fall of 2020, there were additional barriers he had not anticipated. “Students were pulled from class constantly due to Covid exposure. One day you would have one set of kids, and the next day a new set of kids. You felt like you could never move too far ahead in your curriculum due to the overwhelming number of students who had to be caught up.”

FFA participation also plummeted during the 2020-2021 school year when Covid-19 changed what students could and could not do during competitions. “We couldn’t travel, and students had to compete online, which is never as exciting as in person, so students lost the passion to compete or participate in the organization.” Stan felt discouraged during this time because never in his career had he seen students with such low motivation or drive. While interviewing students of the Cottondale chapter the following statements were made. “This [their school in a pandemic] seems like our new normal, I just want to know when Covid will go away.” “I hate quarantine.” Although discouraged about the current situation, students appeared confident in the agriculture classroom and showed motivation when discussing the in-person Career Development Events (CDE’s) happening that year (2021).

Although both Hurricane Michael and the Covid-19 Pandemic were catastrophic for this agriculture program, Stan knew he had to set a personal example of strength for his students. Stan did this by returning to his program and meeting with his officer team to design Covid friendly events to get some participation within the program. Although attendance was low, he was determined to be persistent. That persistence was just as infectious as the Covid-19 program. Students began to show up to CDE practices and program activities. Stan feels the program is not at the same level it was prior to the pandemic, but he is happy with the motivation that is coming back to his students. When asked which of the two catastrophic events was worse, a Category 5 hurricane or the Covid-19 pandemic, Stan quickly responded with, “The pandemic.”

## **Status Report**

The purpose of this case study is for students to get a better understanding of the impacts a catastrophic hurricane can have on agriculture education programs. For the remainder of the class, you will use the above-mentioned story and critically analyze it through Four Frames of Leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This theory is broken down into four leadership frames: structural, symbolic, human resource, and political. The world in which we live is complex and diverse, so to get a holistic picture of what is truly happening, it is important to look at each situation through multiple viewpoints (2013). Each of these viewpoints will give you a more in-depth look at how leadership was impacted and how it changed due to the two catastrophic events that impacted the school. Organizational leadership through this lens is supplemented due to the additional considerations of each lens. The following gives additional insight into this case study through each frame of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

## **Lens of Leadership**

### **Structural Frame**

The structural framework focuses on processes currently found within an organization. The current procedures, rules, goals, policies, and environment that exist or need to be reviewed are all included in the structural frame. These processes could be connected to the communication between leaders and followers to aid in clarifying one's responsibilities within an organization. Another consideration is whether the current structure of an organization is the best for the current situation or if change is needed.

Cottdale High School underwent major communicational challenges both with Hurricane Michael and Covid-19. When the hurricane hit, many of the homes and buildings lost all their power. Because of the damage, students did not enter school for nearly three weeks after the storm. During this time Stan Scurlock spoke about the limited communication within the school. Teachers had left prior to the storm or were trying to assess the damage the storm caused, thus communicating with students was lower on their priorities immediately after the storm. School responsibilities were an afterthought for many as their primary focus was surviving the harsh Florida elements (heat, bugs, wind, etc.) with no power (Burlew, 2018).

Communication was strained again when students were sent home when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March. Stan did not know what to do as he waited for instructions from the administration within the district. Eventually, he was told to create an online education platform for the remainder of the school year and to be "easy" on the students as they faced challenging circumstances. In Stan's opinion, this communication from administration is the cause for the major struggles he faces in his classrooms today. "Students think they can get away with anything because they have for the last year and a half." Stan felt it was time for students to be held accountable for their education. This situation is an ideal example of how to apply the structural frame because it highlights how the disaster changed expectations for both the teachers, students, and administrators within the school. This confusion led to shifts in

teaching and learning environments. The role of the structural frame helps see the confusion created and what should have been done for teachers, students, and administrators.

### **Human Resource Frame**

This framework is focused on identifying the people in an organization, the needs of the individuals, and their value within the organization. It looks at prejudices, dissatisfaction, diversity, and team building. In its essence this looks at giving the team members the power and opportunity to perform their jobs well. The framework assesses the human capital and if they can fulfill their roles within the organization, because of how their needs and values align with the organization's goals.

Throughout the entire interview, Stan mentioned the stress and challenges that he and his students experienced with both the hurricane and Covid-19. Although difficult, the hurricane was an experience that most of the students and teachers in the agriculture program were able to bounce back from. Stan stated, "It is just part of the experience living where we do." The pandemic was much harder for him and his students to bounce back from. "I have never seen anything like this in my entire teaching career." With fear of infection, lack of school support, and uncertainties concerning school, many students began to lose faith in their educational system. As spring 2020 continued, the school district postponed the return to school until fall 2020. Graduations, FFA activities, dances, sports, and all extra-curricular activities were either cancelled or moved online. Students and teachers were both frustrated, and there was not much anyone could do to change their situation.

After a brief time, Stan decided the only way to make a change was to attempt some form of normalcy. He started to put his CDE teams together again and reached out to students about online training opportunities. The goal of these meetings was to give students hope and motivation, because the decision of whether to have state competitions had not been made. He met with his officer team in preparation for the few events that would be held. With unmotivated students and frustrated teachers, things were quite dire.

### **Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame looks at the stories, myths, traditions, missions, and values within an organization. These elements make up the culture within an organization. The symbolic frame looks at how these elements are being addressed, respected, and evaluated. Culture is often the glue that holds an organization together and plays a vital role in uniting new organizations.

Cottdale high school has set strong values for their students through their vision statement: "Together we learn, forever we succeed." The vision statement is reinforced by the school mascot which acts as a unifying symbol for all students within the high school. Additionally, members within the agriculture program at Cottdale are exposed to additional symbols that help unite them within the program. These symbols and traditions are connected to the FFA (Future Farmers of America) element of the program. Activities begin with opening and closing

ceremonies. Each officer is connected to a symbol, and members are expected to dress in a pre-determined way when competing in competitions. These traditions have been part of the Cottondale program for many years and are a major part of agriculture programs throughout the country. Hurricane Michael had a minor impact on the culture of the agriculture program at Cottondale. On the other hand, Covid-19 had a detrimental effect on the program. In 2019, FFA the Cottondale FFA program lost almost half its members. Stan, being a very intuitive agriculture teacher and FFA advisor, decided to lead by example and became the National Association of Agriculture Educations president elect. Through his efforts, he became a symbol of leadership and has set values of what it means to be a member of the FFA in the Cottondale FFA program.

### **Political Frame**

The political frame takes an analytical look at the power dynamics within an organization, stake holder relations, and the communication pathways within the organization. The frame looks at available resources within an organization and their distribution. Finally, the political frame looks at the current networks that exist and their impact on power in an organization.

The Cottondale FFA program is a student run, teacher supervised organization. Stan has taken a step back to allow his students to play a significant role in what happens within the organization, reserving certain power as the advisor and teacher of the program. This dynamic is important for the development of student leadership skills through trial-and-error learning. When looking at networks that impact the Cottondale agriculture program, there are program and school dynamics, program and district dynamics, and program and community dynamics that must be considered. The political frame looks at how those networks were impacted by Hurricane Michael and the pandemic.

Cottondale FFA is a big supporter of the community. One evidence of this is a giant porkchop cookout the program hosts. Stan and his students spend almost 24 hours cooking a great quantity of pork chops for their community. FFA programs are also intricately connected to local farm bureau groups, alumni of the program, and local agriculture businesses as sponsors. Each of these stakeholders were potentially impacted by the storm and the pandemic; those impacts could potentially change their interactions with the Cottondale FFA.

### **Case Problems**

The following are questions to create a discussion and will aid you in synthesizing the information presented to you through this case study. Use the following questions as helpful tools to analyze how the leadership frames have helped you see how leadership influenced the experiences of all involved. Questions have been created using each of the Four Frames of Leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

### **Structural Frame:**

- Prior to the hurricane, define the responsibilities of the teacher and the student in the classroom. How did those responsibilities change after Hurricane Michael? Were there additional changes in responsibilities after Covid 19?
- What do you think of Stan's feelings towards showing compassion towards students? What educational theories support your decision?
- How did communication from the high school administration impact Stan's ability to teach after the hurricane and during the pandemic? Structurally, were there alternatives that could be considered?

### **Human Resource Frame**

- Frustration and disappointment were common emotions felt through both catastrophic events. How did Stan and his students handle these emotions?
- Stan fought against students who no longer had the desire to go to school. What are some options, other than those he tried, that could help his students build back trust in the educational system?
- After Hurricane Michael, the school lost fifty to sixty students. How did this impact student and teacher morale?
- If you were a leader in this community reflecting on Hurricane Michael and Covid, how would you try to prevent loss in the future?
- What are some ways that Stan empowered his students?
- If you were the teacher in this program, how would you try to empower your students?
- How did CDE's act as motivators for students?
- How did Stan's actions help his organization overcome the challenges they faced and lead the organization to success?

### **Symbolic Frame**

- Once competitions were cancelled for in person participation due to the hurricane and Covid continued to cancel in person activities, why do you think the program lost so many members?
- How important was the FFA culture to the success of the program?
- How do you think the stories and experiences students went through will change the culture of the Cottdale FFA program? Why or why not?
- After these students have been through so many challenging events together do you think the program will become more inclusive or less inclusive? Explain your reasoning.
- How did ceremonies and symbols established prior to the hurricane help the students and teachers deal with struggles the hurricane and covid created?
- What cultural elements could be created to help in the event of another storm or pandemic?

## Political Frame

- What are some of the benefits and disadvantages of Stan giving up some of his power to allow students to lead the FFA portion of his program?
- How does Stan's approach to leadership influence conflict resolution within the program? What could Stan do to prepare his students for conflict resolution that might arise due to the tension and stress associated with these catastrophic events?
- How would creating spaces for the students to communicate concerns impact the agriculture program? What would be some of the benefits or disadvantages?
- Do you think Stan had realistic goals when he decided to re-engage with FFA activities, and CDE practices? If you were Stan, what goals would you create for yourself, your students, and your program? Identify short term and long-term goals.
- Why do you think community involvement could be beneficial to the agriculture program, especially after catastrophic events? How do you think Stan's new role as President Elect for the National Association of Agriculture Educators will impact the power dynamic within his program?

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