

Developing a Culture: Learning for All

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss how to develop a culture for high-performing schools. Every school has a culture whether it is being attended to or not. If a school does nothing to develop a culture, it will create itself. Students, teachers, support staff, administrators, and stakeholders will create it. Ultimately, we will have a school culture. Will everyone be moving in the same direction with that culture? Will all stakeholders share the same mission, vision, values, and goals? These are some salient issues I present in this article.

Regardless of population size or location, wherever people spend a considerable amount of time together, a culture emerges - a set of customs, beliefs, values, and norms - that can either create a sense of mutual purpose – mission, vision, values, goals - or perpetrate discord that even precludes the possibility of any unity or shared meaning. Every school has a culture whether it is being attended to or not (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Definition and Characteristics

Culture consists of all the beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and symbols that are characteristic of an organization. More specifically, culture is defined as shared philosophies, ideologies, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, norms, and values (Schein, 2010a). While there is considerable variation in the definitions of school culture, it appears that most contain the following characteristics:

Observed Behavioral Regularities

When organizational members interact, they use common language, terminology, and rituals and ceremonies related to deference and demeanor.

Norms

Standards of behavior evolve in work groups, such as “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay,” or “going beyond the call of duty.” The impact of work group behavior, sanctioned by group norms, results in standards and yardsticks.

Dominant Values

An organization espouses and expects its members to share major values. Typical examples in schools are high performance levels of faculty and students, low absence and dropout rates, and high efficiency and effectiveness.

Philosophy

Policies guide an organization’s beliefs about how employees and clients are to be treated. For example, most school districts and schools have statements of philosophy or mission statements.

Rules

Guidelines exist for getting along in the organization, or the “ropes” that a newcomer must learn in order to become an accepted member. School board policies and school handbooks serve as guides for employee behavior.

Feelings

This is an overall atmosphere that is conveyed in an organization by the physical layout and the way in which members interact with clients or other outsiders (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008).

None of the aforementioned characteristics by itself represents the essence of culture. However, the characteristics taken collectively reflect and give meaning to the concept of culture. And the culture of a school is interrelated with most other concepts in managing schools, including organizational structure, motivation, leadership, decision making, communication, and change. The challenge for the principal is to create a culture that is advancing the school toward its vision and reinforcing the behaviors that are necessary for moving the school forward (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006). The principal as developer of culture is to be a support and visionary.

In a professional learning community, principals work with all stakeholders to develop the school’s culture (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Developing culture is a conscious endeavor, and principals must be proactive as they go about doing that. They begin by having people articulate in very specific terms the kinds of behaviors and commitments they think are necessary to move their school forward. This is a challenge, for every school faces the issue of developing school culture. In developing a culture for school improvement, the principal can pose the following questions (DuFour, DuFour,

Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2007): What is the school trying to become? What is our vision of the school we are trying to create? What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must we demonstrate for our vision to be realized? What goals should we establish to move closer to the school we desire? Are we clear on what is to be accomplished and the criteria we will use in assessing our efforts? Are the current policies, programs, procedure, and practices of our school congruent with our stated vision and values? What are our plans to reduce discrepancies?

Heroes, Traditions, and Networks

The process of developing school cultures is complex. Heroes and heroines, traditions and rituals, and cultural networks play key roles in developing school cultures (Peterson & Deal, 2010; Schein, 2010a). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Heroes and Heroines

Most successful organizations have their heroes and heroines. Heroes and heroines are born and created. The born hero or heroine is the visionary institution builder like Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company, and Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics. Created heroes and heroines, on the other hand, are those the institution has made by noticing and celebrating memorable moments that occur in the day-to-day situational life of the organization. Thomas Watson, former head of IBM, is an example of a situation hero. Other well-known heroes include Lee Iacocca at Chrysler, Sam Walton at Wal-Mart, and Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. Heroes and heroines perpetuate the organization's underlying values, provide role models, symbolize the organization to others, and set performance standards that motivate participant achievement.

In many schools, local heroes and heroines, exemplars of core values, provide models of what everyone should be striving for. These deeply committed staff come in early; are always willing to meet with students and parents; and are constantly upgrading their skills (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006).

Traditions and Rituals

Another key aspect in creating organizational cultures is the everyday activities and celebrations that characterize the organization. Most successful organizations feel that these rituals and symbolic actions should be managed. Through traditions and rituals, recognition of achievement is possible (Kruse & Louis, 2009). The Teacher of the Year Award and National Merit Schools are examples. Similarly, a number of ceremonial rituals may accompany the appointment of a new superintendent of schools or building principal, including press and other announcements, banquets, meetings, and speeches.

Some schools have even created their own reward rituals. At Hollibrook Elementary School in Spring Branch, Texas, traditions and rituals reinforce students

learning. Under the leadership of the principal and faculty, and supported through ties to the Accelerated Schools Model, the school developed numerous traditions to create a powerful professional culture and foster increased student success. For example, faculty meetings became a hotbed of professional dialogue and discussion of practice and published research. “Fabulous Friday” was created to provide students with a wide assortment of courses and activities. A “Parent University” furnished courses and material while building trust between the school and the largely Hispanic community. Norms of collegiality, improvement, and connection reinforce and symbolize what the school is about.

Cultural Networks

Stories or myths of heroes are transmitted by means of the communication network. This network is characterized by various individuals, who play a role in the culture of the school. Each school has *storytellers* who interpret what is going on in the organization. Their interpretation of the information influences the perceptions of others. *Priests* are the worriers of the school and the guardians of the culture’s values. These individuals always have time to listen and provide alternative solutions to problems. *Whisperers* are the powers behind the throne because they have the boss’s ear. Anyone who wants something done will go to the whisperer. *Gossips* carry the trivial day-to-day activities of the school through the communications network. Gossips are very important in building and maintaining heroes. They embellish the heroes’ past feats and exaggerate their latest accomplishments. And, finally, *spies* are buddies in the woodwork. They keep everyone well informed about what is going on in the school. Each of these individuals plays a key role in building and maintaining a school’s culture. It should be noted that the names used here are those ascribed by Deal and Kennedy (1984) and Schein (2010b) to emphasize the importance of communication networks in creating an institution’s organizational culture.

Maintaining School Culture

Once a school’s culture is created, a number of mechanisms help solidify the acceptance of the values and ensure that the culture is maintained or reinforced. These mechanisms are described in the following steps for socializing employees (Kruse & Louis, 2009).

Step 1: Hiring Staff

The socialization process starts with the careful selection of employees. Trained recruiters use standardized procedures and focus on values that are important in the culture. Those candidates whose personal values do not fit with the underlying values of the school are given ample opportunity to opt out (deselect).

Step 2: Orientation

After the chosen candidate is hired, considerable training ensues to expose the person to the culture. Many forms of orientation are also provided to incoming students to a school. For example, transitions from elementary school to middle school and transitions from middle school to high school are conducted.

Step 3: Job Mastery

Whereas Step 2 is intended to foster cultural learning, Step 3 is designed to develop the employee's technological knowledge. As employees move along a career path, the organization assesses their performance and assigns other responsibilities on the basis of their progress. Frequently, schools establish a step-by-step approach to this career plan. For example, some school districts have implemented a three-step career ladder process for teachers: (1) instructors, (2) professional teachers, and (3) career professionals. Others have proposed an approach consisting of four steps: (1) licensed teachers, (2) certified teachers, (3) advanced certified teachers, and (4) lead teachers.

Step 4: Reward and Control Systems

The school pays meticulous attention to measuring results and to rewarding individual performance. Reward systems are comprehensive, consistent, and focus on those aspects of the school that are tied to success and the values of the culture. For example, a school will specify the factors that are considered important for success. Operational measures are used to assess these factors, and performance appraisals of employees are tied to the accomplishment of these factors. Promotion and merit pay are determined by success on each of the predetermined critical factors. For example, teachers who do not fit the school's culture are transferred to another school or are dismissed. It should be noted that collective bargaining agreements may stipulate procedures for teacher transfer or grounds for dismissal (American Arbitration Association, 2010).

Step 5: Adherence to Values

As personnel continue to work for the school, their behavior closely matches the underlying values of the culture. Identification with underlying values helps employees reconcile personal sacrifices caused by their membership in the school. Personnel learn to accept the school's values and place their trust in the school not to hurt them. For instance, teachers work long hours on a multiplicity of fragmented tasks for which they sometimes receive little recognition from their superiors, subordinates, and community. They sometimes endure ineffective school board members and supervisors and job assignments that are undesirable and inconvenient. Identification with the common values of the school allows these teachers to justify such personal sacrifices.

Step 6: Reinforcing Folklore

Throughout the socialization process, the school exposes its members to rites and rituals, stories or myths, and heroes that portray and reinforce the culture. For example, in one educational institution, the story is told of a principal who was fired because of his harsh handling of teachers. The principal had incorrectly believed a myth that being “tough” with his teachers would enhance himself in the eyes of his superiors. The school district deemed such leadership behavior to be inconsistent with its school district philosophy of cultivating good interpersonal relationships and high levels of morale and job satisfaction among all its employees.

Step 7: Consistent Role Models

Those individuals who have performed well in the school serve as role models to newcomers to the school. By identifying these teachers as symbolizing success, the school encourages others to do likewise. Role models in strong-culture schools can be thought of as one type of ongoing staff development for all teachers.

Conclusion

As developers of culture, principals ensure that their school’s culture reflects its vision and values. They do this by engaging all members of the professional learning community. Together they reflect on what they value and envision and how they will act to support those values. They regularly audit their culture. They orient new staff and incoming students. They recognize heroes and heroines, share stories, and celebrate people whose contributions reinforce their culture.

There are many things teachers can do to help facilitate the culture of a building, but if you do not have that leader, if you do not have that person (the principal) who is willing to absorb and buy into the culture to make a difference, then you are not going to have a very positive culture. And each school needs support from the top administrator in the district (the superintendent) to develop a strong culture focused on learning.

Every school has a culture whether it is being attended to or not. If a school does nothing to develop a culture, it will create itself. Students will create it. Faculty will create it. Students will create their little piece of the climate. Teachers will create their little piece of the climate. Support staff will create their little piece of the climate. Ultimately, we will have a school culture. Will everyone be moving in the same direction with that culture? Will all stakeholders share the same mission, vision, values, and goals? Not very likely.

In a professional learning community, principals work with all stakeholders to develop the school’s culture (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Culture is a conscious endeavor, and principals must be proactive as they go about creating a culture that is advancing the school toward its vision and reinforcing the behaviors that are necessary for moving the school forward. Throughout the development of a school culture, student achievement must be paramount. A school should be a place where students come to

learn. Principals can make that happen by functioning as instructional leaders while guiding the development of the culture.

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