

Building and Sustaining Positive, Collaborative School Cultures – Part I

With
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“Four years of public school teaching – and ten years as a principal – convinces me that the nature of relationships among adults who inhabit a school has more to do with a school’s quality and character, with the accomplishments of its pupils and the professionalism of its teachers than any other factor.”

- Roland Barth

“Culture is the most powerful source of leverage for bringing about change in school – or any organization for that matter.”

- Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement*, 1992.

Culture – The Stage on Which Leadership is Played Out

“Culture is a powerful force in any organization in which people share history. It influences the way people think, what they value, how they feel, and how they act. Some cultures are nurturing, but some are toxic. A critical leadership competency is the ability to understand, read, and shape school culture. Culture is crucial to promoting staff and student learning, and it can enhance or deter reform and innovation. Roland Barth (2002) emphasized the power of culture when he wrote, ‘Probably the most important and most difficult job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of the school. A school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have.’ Every culture is a reflection of ‘hidden history’ – what has come before.”

Source: Robbins, P. and Alvy, H. (2004) *The New Principal’s Fieldbook: Strategies for Success*, ASCD. (To order: 1-800-933-ASCD)

“School capacity is the crucial variable affecting instructional quality and corresponding student achievement. At the heart of school capacity are principals focused on the development of teachers’ knowledge and skills, professional community, program coherence and technical resources.”

(Newmann, King, and Youngs, 2000)

“We need leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself.”

(Fullan, 2002)

Impact on Learning

	Percentile Entering	Percentile Leaving
Average School Average Teacher	50	
Highly Ineffective School and Teacher	50	
Highly Effective School Ineffective Teacher	50	
Highly Ineffective School Highly Effective Teacher	50	
Highly Effective School and Teacher	50	
Highly Effective School Average Teacher	50	

What Works in Schools

(Robert Marzano, 2003, ASCD)

“Factors Affecting Student Achievement”

School

- guaranteed and viable curriculum
- challenging goals and effective feedback
- parent and community involvement
- safe and orderly environment
- collegiality and professionalism



What Works in Schools

(Robert Marzano, 2003, ASCD)

“Factors Affecting Student Achievement”

Teacher

- instructional strategies
- classroom management
- classroom curriculum design



What Works in Schools

(Robert Marzano, 2003, ASCD)

“Factors Affecting Student Achievement”

Student

- home atmosphere
- learned intelligence and background knowledge
- motivation



A G E N D A

Welcome, Introductions, Overview, Culture and Student/Staff Learning, Agenda, Outcomes, Expectations

Developing a Vibrant, Healthy, Collaborative, Learning Centered Culture

- * What are the elements of culture?
- * What are some ways to “read” culture?
- * What are some approaches to “shaping” or “transforming” culture so that toxic places become positive, student-focused collaborative ones?

Key Ingredients of Positive, Learning Focused Cultures

Reflections, Action Planning, Feedback, Personal Next Steps

Outcomes

Participants will have the opportunity to:

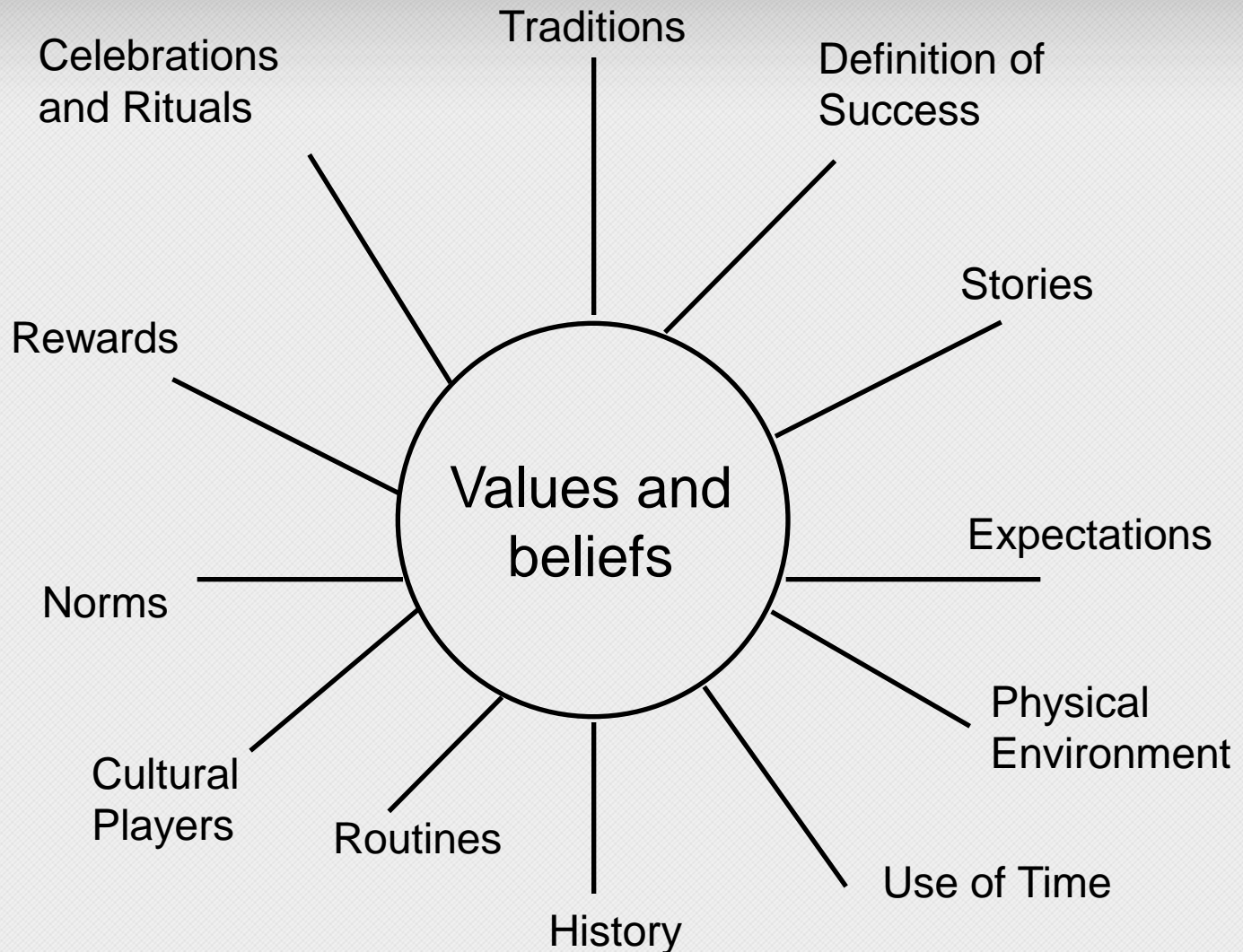
- Examine the elements of culture.
- Experience a variety of strategies for “reading” culture.
- Analyze approaches to “shaping” and “transforming” toxic cultures.
- Discuss the research on collaborative cultures and their relationship to high performing schools.
- Generate personal next steps.

Culture can be:

- **Positive**
- **Negative**
- **Toxic**
- **Fragmented**

Which two do you believe would be the most difficult to work with?

A Framework for Understanding Culture



School

If this is not a place where tears are understood,
where do I go to cry,

If this is not a place my spirit can take wing,
where do I go to fly,

If this is not a place where my questions can be asked,
where do I go to seek,

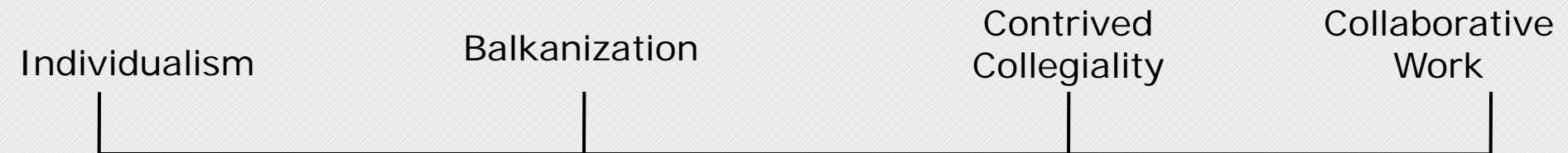
If this is not a place where my feelings can be heard,
where do I go to speak,

If this is not a place you'll accept me as I am,
where can I go to be,

If this is not a place where I can try, and learn, and grow,
where can I just be me?

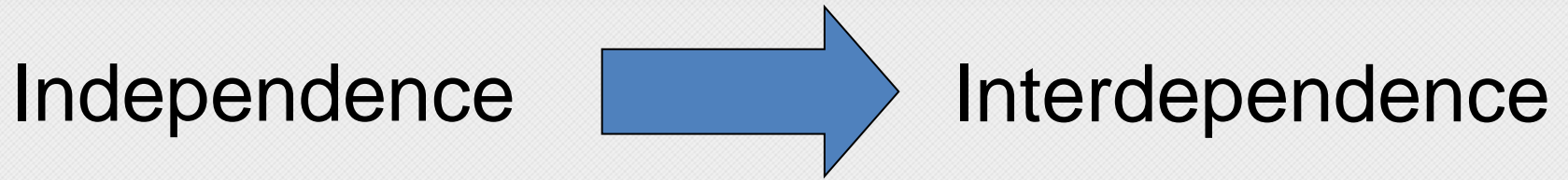


Relationships Among Colleagues



Andy Hargreaves, 1989

Ways Teachers Work



Story Telling

Aid & Assistance

Sharing

Joint Work

Judith Warren Little, 1989

Cultural Norms That Affect School Improvement

- Collegiality
- Experimentation
- High Expectations
- Trust and Confidence
- Tangible Support
- Reaching Out to Knowledge Base
- Appreciation and Recognition
- Caring, Celebration and Humor
- Involvement in Decision Making
- Protection of What's Important
- Honest, Open Communication
- Traditions

Dysfunctional Norms

- Put your school down
- Hate your work
- Hide new ideas and information from others
- Treat colleagues poorly
- Look busy and innovative when you're not
- Reward and recognize others on the basis of politics
- Laugh at and criticize those who are innovative
- Complain and criticize your school to the outside
- Complain constantly about everything
- Distrust colleagues
- Share information only when it benefits your own unit
- Do what will serve personal needs first and the needs of students later

Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership (1998). Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

“Nondiscussables”

“The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of nondiscussables: the fewer nondiscussables, the healthier the school; the more nondiscussables, the more pathology in the school culture. Nondiscussables are subjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently for are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations take place only in the parking lot, the rest rooms, the playground, the carpool, or the dinner table at home. Fear abounds that open discussion of these incendiary issues -- at a faculty meeting, for example -- will cause a meltdown. To change the culture of the school, the instructional leader must enable its residents to name, acknowledge, and address the nondiscussables – especially those that impede learning.”

Source: Barth, Roland, “The Culture Builder,”
Educational Leadership, Vol. 59, No. 8, May 2002, p.8

Reflect upon the organization in which you work. What are some “nondiscussables”?

School culture is reflected in:

- How teachers teach
- How students experience “school”
- How parents experience “school”
- What is discussed in the teacher’s room
- How staff dress
- Parking lot traditions
- Attitudes toward work
- Attitudes toward staff development and professional growth
- Celebrations
- Stories told to visitors, newcomers
- The physical environment
- Rules
- Traditions



School culture is reflected in:

- Schedules
- Room assignments
- Parent/community school gatherings
- Rituals
- Decision making practices
- How data are used
- Communications
- Policies and procedures
- How individuals work together (or don't)
- What organizational members value
- What organizational members will or will not do
- How information travels within an organization
- Climate
- Performance data



“Taking Stock,” The Cultural Context of Individual Schools

“Despite its pervasive nature, culture or inner reality is often overlooked as a critical force. Instruction, curriculum, quality assessment, and leadership surely all contribute to a quality school. But “the inner, unspoken set of values and purposes that weave quality into the daily routine and motivate everyone to do his or her best” (Deal and Peterson, 1993) is equally if not more powerful in moving a school toward achieving a vision of quality. A school’s culture is reflective of its organizational members. The culture is the “meaning” individuals create in their world of work. Bennis (1991) has written, “Each employee is, to a remarkable extent, the organization in miniature.” This explains both why culture is such a critical force and how individual interactions influence the culture. Because the way people interact daily or “do business” at a site dramatically influences its ultimate productivity for all members, culture is a powerful school improvement tool. It is not surprising, however, that if a culture is a negative one, it can serve as a hindering force to school improvement efforts” (p. 27).

From *The Principal’s Companion* (Robbins and Alvy, 2003)

Reflections and Personal Next Steps

As you reflect upon the school in which you work,

- What are some positive cultural features that foster quality teaching and learning?
- What are some cultural characteristics that could hinder quality teaching and learning?
- What cultural aspects would you like to reshape?