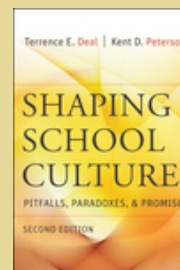




# THE MAIN IDEA

*current education book summaries*



File: Leadership and  
School Culture

## Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes, & Promises Second Edition

By Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson (Jossey-Bass, 2009)

### S.O.S. (A Summary Of the Summary)

*The main ideas of the book are:*

- Leaders can shape their school's culture to create a more cohesive, meaningful, and productive place for teachers to teach and students to learn.
- Effective leaders manage the technical side of running their school while at the same time infusing their school with passion, purpose, and meaning.

*Why I chose this book:*

As leaders we tend to look for structural answers to education problems rather than dealing with the cultural side of schools. We claim we're too busy to plan that end-of-the-year celebration or write a personal card to an ailing teacher. The book underscores the importance of attending to culture building and helps leaders expand their repertoire of ways to improve a school's culture.

Also, this book is a classic on school culture (this is the second edition) and the authors are experts on organizational culture. They pull together the best of what is known about culture in both education and business. A reason to read the actual book is to hear all the powerful stories that illustrate the power of culture in an organization. Plus, their writing is compelling and evocative!

### The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

- √ *How all aspects of school culture – even the books on the principal's shelf – exert influence over your school*  
Learn to pay attention to the signals being sent by the artifacts, architecture, routines, and other parts of your school culture.
- √ *How two different school leaders, by slowly and systematically crafting their school culture, built award-winning schools*  
By investing in the building blocks of culture – symbols, history, stories, rituals – you can improve school performance.
- √ *How to prevent the development of a toxic culture*  
By understanding the elements of school culture you will be less likely to make the types of simple mistakes that lead schools into negativity.
- √ *How a school leader can take on different roles to shape school culture*  
Learn the eight culture-enhancing roles a leader can assume – school leader as historian, anthropological sleuth, visionary, icon, potter, poet, actor, and healer.
- √ *How important it is for leaders to seek a balance between their rational and passionate sides*  
By learning the ten paradoxes of leadership, you will better understand the challenge of this balance.
- √ *How to work with your staff to begin improving your school's culture*  
See The Main Idea's Professional Development Suggestions at the end for workshop ideas to use with staff.

## INTRODUCTION

We often hear people say, “If only schools would be run more like businesses.” Well-intended school-reform efforts have attempted to make schools more rational and technically advanced, emulating what people assume to be more like successful businesses. However, focusing on standardization and test scores have replaced local discretion, creativity, and teacher ingenuity to the detriment of schools. The truth is that *culture* plays a dominant role in successful businesses. It is the *mediocre* businesses that focus on only the short-term goal of making a profit. When schools follow this mediocre path, the unintended result is that they create places lacking in passion, purpose, and meaning. What were once joyful places of promise and hope have too often become mechanized factories focused on producing only a small fraction of what a well-educated person needs and the community wants.

For example, Starbucks quickly grew – from 100 to 123,000 stores in ten years. To deal with this growth, the company made some changes. They used automated coffee machines which undermined the skills of the local barista and they sealed their coffee beans for freshness which eliminated the store’s special coffee aroma. In 2007 people were beginning to call the store “sterile” and “cookie cutter.” The CEO knew that a company should be driven by values and people, not profits. He wrote a memo to senior executives about the need to get back to their core and he shut down all stores one day in 2008 to reculture and retune the baristas.

This book is about reemphasizing the importance of culture and how this can lead to better performance – not just of test scores, but in the full range of social, emotional, and communal outcomes we expect from schools. This taken-for-granted aspect of schools – school *culture* – encompasses the school’s unwritten rules, traditions, norms, and expectations. School cultures are complex, made up of traditions and rituals built up over time. Culture affects *all* aspects of a school from informal conversations in the faculty room to the type of instruction valued to how professional development is viewed. In research on both businesses and schools, culture stands out as a strong predictor of success.

So, what prevents us from strengthening school cultures? Why do standards and testing continue to play such a dominant role in educational reform? Looking at the cultural side of schools is too often viewed as “soft” or superficial. We do not think about the symbolic aspect of schools when we think of successful leadership, and yet it is an essential aspect of leadership. This book examines the powerful ways that leaders can shape culture to create a meaningful environment for teachers to teach and students to learn.

## PART I: THE ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

This next section describes the different components of school culture that profoundly affect the entire school.

### **The Power to Transform -- *The Culture of an Award-Winning School***

Ganado Primary School is an example of a school that was one of Arizona’s worst, and then, by transforming its culture, became one of the best. The brief description of the school below illustrates some of the important components of school culture that will be described in more detail in the subsequent chapters. Ganado is a small Navajo community twenty-seven miles from the nearest town. It has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country and forty-six percent of its families do not have running water. Yet the school has become the town’s pride and joy under the leadership of the principal Sigmund Boloz who did a great deal to build the school’s culture. The school was identified as a School of Excellence in 1997, received the Arizona A+ award three times, and persists in serving its students and community with a school that has a dedicated, professional, and unique culture.

Principal Boloz found a way to create a balanced culture that honors the community’s deep sense of history and traditions while at the same time maintaining an unwavering present-day focus on learning and literacy. In creating a new school building they were able to convey this balance. The school grounds represent the school’s cultural values. A visitor entering the school experiences an open, inviting area dominated with a depiction of Spider Rock, representing a sacred time in Navajo history. This, as well as other Navajo symbols throughout the school, demonstrate that Ganado Primary is historically anchored and that learning is instrumental to being a Navajo. In addition, the library was purposely placed at the center of the school to show the importance of literacy. The hallways display awards for educational excellence won by students and staff as well as academic work demonstrating a wide variety of student accomplishments. The combined symbols of student achievement along with Navajo traditions fuses ancient tribal ways and modern practices in ways that connect the school with the local community.

In addition to the architecture and artifacts around the school, the culture of the school has been shaped by a number of other factors. The year is brimming with rituals and ceremonies for everyone – students, staff, parents, and elders. Four times a year Boloz held a “Once Upon a Time Breakfast” meeting. He invited students, teachers, and parents to bring their favorite books to celebrate literacy while they enjoyed food. Students were acknowledged for their academic growth during the “Celebrating Quality Learning Award Ceremony,” in which students received awards for quality academic work as well as progress in mastering the Navajo language. Learning to read resulted in a large celebration at the school. Whenever a student reached 3.0 on Accelerated Reader, the student was

presented with an “I can read guaranteed” t-shirt while the whole school applauded the accomplishment. In addition to these rituals, the principal cultivated a culture of learning. Boloz met frequently with teachers to discuss books, articles, and curriculum. The teachers shared ideas about reading in “Reading Achievement Meetings” and examined school progress as part of “The Instructional Improvement Committee.” Other elements helped to shape the school culture as well. One tradition they developed was the “Caring Adults” program in which adults volunteered to check in daily with a struggling student. Even the principal and the head custodian had someone. Histories and storytelling were also important aspects of the culture. Many told stories of change and renewal, especially the story celebrating the transformation of the school from one of the worst to one of the best in Arizona. Over time, many core norms became deeply embedded in the culture. Now staff always ask, “What does this child need?” and it is assumed that staff will address this problem together. Kids are always at the center of decisions, knowledge is valued, and the expertise of teachers is respected. However, Ganado did not instantaneously change from worst to first; it took many years of hard work, leadership, and a communal desire for something better. The next chapters will explore the elements of a productive culture in more detail.

## Artifacts, Architecture, and Routines – *Symbols of Culture*

Symbols are tangible representations of values and beliefs. Banners with school mottos, displays of student work, and other symbols express shared sentiments and commitments. Symbols infuse an organization, a nation, or a family with meaning, and they influence our thoughts, motivation, and behavior. In schools, symbols are important elements of culture. In designing buildings, creating displays, or choosing logos, we must be mindful of the signals being sent. In fact, symbols often play a more prominent role than many suspect. What is assumed to be “fluff” often impacts leadership and culture. Artifacts have the effect of making schools either meaningful places for celebrating student success or empty vessels of bureaucratic control. Below are some examples of symbols:

### The Symbolism of Artifacts

- *Banners and posters*: Banners exhort students to work hard and let their intelligence shine through.
- *Displays of student work*: Hallways become galleries celebrating student creativity and accomplishment.
- *Symbols of diversity*: The walls of one school display beautiful Hmong stitchery. In another, the flags of every nation represented in the school are raised each morning.
- *Awards, trophies, and plaques*: Traditionally, schools have displayed only *athletic* awards. More schools now display the academic and artistic successes of students and staff. Audubon Elementary School is known for its “Hall of Honor” in which every single award won by student or staff is matted and framed. There are articles, interviews, and poetry written by staff and students.
- *Historical artifacts and collections*: To keep its history alive, one school displays textbooks of bygone eras and old writing tools from the past (from fountain pens to retired computer screens), as well as photos of groups of children from years past.

### The Symbolism of Architecture

Students spend more than fourteen thousand hours inside a school building over twelve years. The school’s setting and physical appearance have a lot of time to influence these students. Recently, architects have worked more closely with educators to create a school space that communicates a more personal, intimate learning environment with ties to the community. For example, at Ganado Primary the library is large, airy, and in the middle of the school to convey the centrality of literacy. Architecture also can tie a school to its community. For example, in a New Mexico Pueblo, one principal battled with a superior because instead of a chain-link fence around the school she wanted a Pueblo adobe wall. Furthermore, the condition of the school has symbolic meaning as well. If it is dilapidated, dirty, or poorly landscaped, a school becomes an eyesore rather than a symbol of pride. A carefully tended patch of grass and flowers represents the care and attention given to students and is an oasis in a blighted neighborhood.

### Living Logos -- The Symbolism in Daily Routines

Principals and other leaders serve as “living logos.” They send powerful symbolic messages as they go about their daily routines through their words and actions. They transmit their ideas and ideals through the books they read, the words they use, the issues they raise, the ideas they float, the observations they make when visiting a class, and the things they get upset or excited about. Below are some examples of the types of symbols leaders convey:

- *The symbolism of action*. How principals spend their time sends a powerful message. One elementary school principal spends time on the playground connecting with students and parents despite having reports to finish. Leaders are on stage whether they visit a classroom or conduct a meeting.
- *The symbolism of professional learning*. One principal reads philosophy as well as current educational books. He talks constantly about new ideas. Having a bookshelf with important educational books sends a different message than having policy manuals from the central office. The principal isn’t the only one whose actions are symbolic. When teachers discuss instruction (either in meetings or over morning coffee) it symbolizes their commitment to a learning community.
- *The symbolism of writing*. Ganado Primary’s principal wrote to students through the school post office. Some principals write a column in the school newspaper. Others tell stories of achievement, or discuss issues through memos, blogs or podcasts.
- *The symbolism of joy, laughter, and fun*. When staff smiles, laughs, and uses humor they send messages of joy.

While the symbols, logos, and artifacts of a school may seem mundane, they convey important messages to the school community. School leaders need to think twice about what these symbols as well as their own words and deeds convey to others.

## Historical Roots – A Fundamental Part of School Culture

All schools have histories, and it is a school's history that shapes its culture. Culture evolves over time from controversy and conflict, triumph and tragedy. Some *negative* cultures result from unsettled slights, missteps, fads, and bad leadership. Wounds left to fester lead to a negative tone. In a *positive* culture, schools see past events as an opportunity to learn. A positive understanding and acceptance of what came before can be an important grounding for future decisions. In positive cultures people comb through past experiences for important lessons. Looking at a school's history helps to develop that shared wisdom that lets people know what is the best approach to take. Without roots, an organization often repeats past mistakes and drifts from its core. Learning its history is critical to acquiring a thorough understanding of the culture of a school.

One school district was growing rapidly by adding a lot of new staff and leaders. There was uncertainty about the new leadership and divisions between veteran and new staff had begun to emerge. The district decided to launch the school year in a different way: a trip through the past. Instead of the superintendent beginning with reports of new policies and plans for the coming year, hundreds of administrators revisited their past and were reminded of how things came to be. At the kick-off event administrators were assigned to different tables, labeled by decades (1980s, 1990s, etc.), based on when they started working. Each table had artifacts from that decade – pictures, newspaper articles – and each group had to prepare a presentation of their decade for the larger group. After each group laughed at old practices, cried about the loss of a colleague, and remembered success with a challenging student, they presented their decade's history through stories, songs, and dramatizations. The common understanding of their history helped to build new bonds. The next day when the superintendent laid out his plans for the coming year he rooted his vision in events and lessons from the past.

A school's history can be captured in a variety of ways. Existing documents – old annuals, official papers, or minutes of meetings -- are a rich source. So are artifacts: trophy cases, pictures on walls, or architecture. A school leader can get a reading of a school's history by poking around and listening, but also by asking a few key questions:

- *General Questions:* Why was the school created? What were its initial core values? Who were the first staff? Who has had a major influence on the school's direction initially and over time? How have the mission and values changed over time?
- *Leadership:* Who were the formal and informal leaders of the school? What new approaches did they bring and what did they stand for? Was leadership shared with staff? Did leaders build trust with the staff and the community?
- *Crises, conflicts, and controversies.* What were the major controversies? What were the issues and how were they resolved? Were the issues dealt with honestly or was hostility buried? Are current issues tied to any past conflicts?
- *People, personalities, relationships.* How did people treat each other – with respect, disdain, or distance? Was there a shared sense of mission or did the staff divide into factions?
- *Changes, modifications, or adjustments.* Change is never easy and can have a significant impact on culture. How were new programs or approaches initiated? Ended? How were staff involved with these decisions? Was there support for the initiative? Trust?

Reconnecting with historical roots is a fundamental step in understanding and shaping school culture.

## Mission, Vision and Values – Capturing the School's Culture

At the center of a school's culture is its mission -- the critical purpose of what people do. It is intangible yet it inspires teachers to teach, school leaders to lead, and children to learn. The mission shapes and reflects what the school hopes to accomplish. It is most important that people *share* a belief in what the school hopes to realize. Study after study shows the power of a shared sense of mission to guide decisions, motivate innovation, strengthen commitment, and energize collaboration.

The concrete attempt to capture the purpose of a school often results in a mission or vision statement. Unfortunately, most of these documents are abstract and have little to do with the day-to-day life of schools. Most of these documents remain unknown. People need to be able to connect with the school's mission in an emotional way. Authentic purposes are powerful and affect hearts as well as heads. Achievement scores, for example, are poor substitutes for what schools can contribute to young lives. If a school does not stand for something more than an improvement in scores, then it probably doesn't get to the heart of the school community.

While the school's purpose or mission guide the larger school direction, values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms often shape school culture on a more daily basis. These beliefs and values are powerful in schools because they impact everything from how student capacity is viewed (immutable or alterable) to how collaboration is viewed (useless idea or core principle). Norms are what consolidate assumptions, values, and beliefs. They are the unspoken rules governing behavior (what one should talk about during prep periods to how often one should attend workshops). There are both positive and negative norms. It is an essential task of principals and teacher-leaders to identify these norms, and then reinforce the positive while working to transform the negative.

EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE NORMS	EXAMPLES OF NEGATIVE, DYSFUNCTIONAL NORMS
Trust people with respect. Be willing to take on responsibilities. Try to initiate changes to improve performance. Encourage those who suggest new ideas. Share useful information and new ideas. Solve problems together when they occur. Find ways to extend one's own learning.	Don't disagree with the principal. Don't make waves and remain in your silo. Hide information from others. Treat colleagues poorly. Look busy when you're not. Laugh at and criticize those who are innovative. Do what will serve personal needs.

## Stories and Tales – *Passing Along the Vision*

The stories, tales, and myths that people tell become a shaping force in a school's culture. These "little stories" carry values, convey morals, describe solutions to dilemmas, and impact the school's culture. Sometimes they provide comic relief and at other times they reveal core values. However, these tales often have a short lifespan and fade away after the event. It is everyone's role to tell stories, but it is the role of the leader to keep the stories positive and help them endure.

An example of a story that captures a special moment is as follows. *Samuel was a challenge. At seven he was chronically truant and arrived in ragged clothes. After getting him new clothes and dealing with these problems it was time for him to learn to read. I worked with him for a few weeks and then it happened. He finally volunteered to read in a group. After Samuel struggled through the first sentence he looked at me. Unable to contain my joy, tears flowed freely as he beamed with the first smile I'd ever seen on his face.*

Educators know when important breakthroughs take place, but these kinds of stories have often been marginalized by a pervasive fascination with logic and numbers. Just give me the facts; we don't have time to tell tales. Only recently has the momentum shifted. Perhaps due to the documented connection between culture and productivity, businesses are starting to take stories seriously. In recent years, the number of books on storytelling has proliferated. One such book, *Made to Stick* (Heath and Heath, 2007), argues that what makes ideas stick is stories. For example, the Subway sandwich company launched a new advertising campaign, "7 Under 6" – seven of its subs had less than six grams of fat -- which failed until they introduced the *story* about Jared Fogler. He weighed 425 pounds but then lost 100 pounds in three months on a diet of these Subway sandwiches. This is not an isolated example. When people hear a speech, only 5 percent remember the facts; 63 percent remember the stories. If you want to motivate people, communicate clearly, and lead effectively, it's hard to beat a good story.

One school makes sure its stories are told. Beaverton Public Schools holds an annual "Pits and Berries" storytelling time to share tales of the best (Berries) and worst (Pits) moments of the school year. Stories are first told in tables, and then tables joined other tables, working up to the final judging when an applause meter decided the winner in each category. Convening the educational campfire need not be difficult. Just putting staff in a circle and inviting them to tell stories is all it takes. These "little" stories become part of the school culture and draw people together in under a shared umbrella of meaning and spirit. Stories are the language of leadership. In spotting and telling tales, principals actively shape the culture of their schools.

## Rituals and Ceremonies – *Culture in Action*

Rituals are regular meaning-filled interactions that reinforce, renew, and reenergize cultures. A culture without rituals is meaningless and will wither and die. Imagine if we canceled Halloween or summer picnics. Rituals concretize our values. They mark the passage of time, heal losses, acknowledge accomplishments, and renew our hopes. Rituals put us in touch with our core values and in fact are the key to understanding culture. Furthermore, sharing rituals helps people bond and solidifies their membership in a special group.

For example, one school has a ritual in which every Thursday morning the food service workers make toast for staff and students even though this isn't in their job descriptions. This symbolic "breaking bread" together energizes the community as well as provides time to share how the week is going, get advice, or laugh. Classrooms, like schools, need their own rituals to bring meaning and passion into learning. One teacher starts her second grade class each morning by asking, "What are we going to be our best at today?" As students share their instructional and noninstructional goals, the teacher encourages them. Then, at the end of the day she reconvenes students to have them assess how well they met their goals. This simple ritual builds enthusiasm, reinforces values, bonds people together, and recognizes accomplishments.

Ceremonies are like rituals, but they are larger and more complex. They, too, communicate values, celebrate success, and strengthen bonds. For example, one school hosts a unique evening featuring student artwork, matted and displayed, for parents and community members to come together and appreciate the students' creativity. In another school system, the superintendent decided to launch the year in a different and special way. He had all the leaders of the district come in on the Saturday before school started, and the theme of the day was "The Courage to Lead in Times of Change." Over two hundred leaders voluntarily showed up and they took a walk through their past that started with a walk through the Old Town, continued through an art museum, and ended up with a presentation by the coach of the River Cats explaining how the baseball team won the championship that year. At each stop there was an emphasis on values, working together, and connecting to the past as a springboard to the future. At the end of the day teams met to discuss the more functional topic of "what next?" and the day was deemed a success by all.

Schools have different categories of rituals and ceremonies that do culture's symbolic work:

- *Greeting rituals connect people.* In the mornings, principals and teachers use unique rituals to welcome students or staff.
- *Transition rituals provide bridges.* These rituals help organizations with transitions, such as letting go of old ways or ending a school year. At one end-of-year assembly the staff sing the farewell song from *The Sound of Music* and another school creates a commemorative "Big Book" that captures the year's events and accomplishments and which remains in the library.
- *Opening day ceremonies rebind staff.* Kick-off events remind people why they are there. One school had a beginning of year potluck in which each person brought a dish representing something they did over the summer (e.g., Texas chili from a teacher who went to a workshop in Texas). One school reworks the mission each year, has it redone by a calligrapher, and everyone signs it.

- *Battle preparation rituals prepare people for challenges.* The same way coaches use pep talks before athletic events, some schools develop rituals before state-mandated tests such as providing an enormous cake that reads, “We Will Succeed” on it.
- *Initiation rituals connect the newcomers.* Schools have different ways of initiating new staff. Some have ritual introductions, others have veteran teachers share the school’s history and traditions.
- *Recognition ceremonies.* Successful cultures find ways to celebrate. In one school ceremony the principal calls the name of a student who has achieved something, then paints the student’s hand. The student slaps the wall with a high-five leaving an imprint. Underneath the principal writes the name of the student and the accomplishment to add to their hall of fame.

### **Informal Staff Roles – Positive and Negative Conveyors of Culture**

Keeping a school’s culture on track and headed in a positive direction is the primary role of leaders in official positions. However, they get a lot of help from those in a variety of informal roles. Every school has unofficially sanctioned players that have an impact on the school culture. In a positive and supportive culture, these staff members play a role in keeping the culture productive. However, in schools with a toxic culture, these staff members play the role of reinforcing the negative.

#### **Informal Roles Played in a School Culture**

- *Priests and priestesses* are the keepers of the culture. In a positive culture they share the history and traditions of the school at special occasions. As the keepers of confidences they hold regular “confessionals” and make sure that significant “secrets” find the ears of leaders. In a positive school they balance tradition and innovation making sure that new ways don’t sweep away the school’s roots. In a toxic culture they transmit and perpetuate negative aspects of the culture.
- *Storytellers* see significance in mundane happenings that others often miss. Because stories have such an influential effect on people, storytellers have a great deal of influence. In a positive school, storytellers weave stories that reflect the core values of the school. In a more toxic culture, the tale tellers keep alive memories of every failure, unresolved problem, or lost opportunity.
- *Spies* are covert observers of what is going on and then pass this intelligence on. In a positive culture they let people know what’s coming down the road to adequately prepare them. In a toxic culture they are destructive forces who squelch reform efforts.
- *Gossips* maintain major informal networks and circulate the latest rumors. In a positive culture leadership can rely on the gossips to be in contact with resistant staff or worried parents whenever a key decision is being considered. In a negative culture, gossips become rumor mongers who look for any dirt they can spread to ruin good reputations.
- *Heroes and heroines* serve as role models who inspire us to be better than we are in positive cultures. In contrast, in toxic schools the *anti-heroes* encourage others to act in ways that are contrary to the school’s values.

These are just some examples of the types of informal positive and negative roles staff members play in shaping school culture. The important point is that this informal cultural network is a key component of the culture of a school. Leaders need to work to nurture and support the positive players while minimizing the impact of the negative ones. To do this, the leaders need to know who plays which role. Furthermore, they need to consult priests before making decisions, provide a stage for the storytellers, celebrate the heroes, and use gossips to spread key information.

## **PART II: THE ROLE OF LEADERS IN SHAPING SCHOOL CULTURE**

### **Case Studies of Schools That Have Changed Their Culture**

Bringing together the different elements of culture – from stories and history to rituals – is a challenge even for the most talented leader. Too often principals rely on copying the culture of an already successful school. However, this rarely works. Instead, principals need to build their culture based on their own local materials and conditions. This chapter contains seven case studies of principals who brought together unique elements to create their own thriving school cultures. Below is an example of one of those case studies; the rest can be found in Chapter 9.

Rick DuFour became the principal of Adlai E. Stevenson High School in 1983 when the school’s culture was shaped by the fact that it ranked students and sorted them into strict categories based on ability level. DuFour began engaging the staff, parents, and students in a series of conversations about what type of school they hoped Stevenson might become. He also provided them with pertinent research about effective schools and data on the school’s students. With this information, they created a vision statement endorsed by all. Although DuFour engaged the faculty in many discussions about the *structure* of the school (such as getting rid of the remedial track), transforming the *culture* posed a much more challenging problem. Traditional beliefs about students and tracking had a long history. At every faculty meeting DuFour told stories of teacher teams who worked beyond the call of duty to help students achieve academic success. He told the story of a social studies teacher who suggested sophomores be admitted to an AP class. He told another story about an English department that got rid of its remedial track by providing a writing center to help students who struggled with their writing. As he told each story he presented a small plaque – a “Super Pat” – for the teacher he was recognizing. DuFour emphasized the importance of celebration and asked others to nominate colleagues for Super Pats and share their own stories. Soon faculty came forth with nominations and each faculty meeting began with stories and celebration with the presentation of Super Pats. DuFour added to this with his own stories of collective achievement by searching constantly for evidence of progress (in grade distributions, attendance, test gains, and improved parent or student satisfaction) and sharing this data with staff.

He also introduced new celebrations and traditions. For example, each school year began with a “Happy New Year Party” planned by faculty leaders. New staff were presented with official staff t-shirts and led through a humorous recitation of the “faculty pledge.” During orientation they learned about the school’s history and vision rather than administrative trivia. A “Quarter Century Club” was started to honor those who had served more than 25 years and a longevity pin was given to staff every five years. An annual luncheon was established to honor staff who had worked on school improvement plans. As a result of these new culture-enhancing practices and others, the school became the first in the county to receive the US Department of Education’s Excellence in Education Award.

## Transforming Toxic Cultures

This chapter looks at what happens when things go sour and a school develops a toxic culture. In one extreme example Jefferson High School (a pseudonym) developed a negative culture within a relatively short period. Previously the school had served a wealthy population of high-achieving students. When the neighborhood changed drastically and immigrants and low-income families moved in, the students were not as strong academically. The faculty refused to meet the needs of these new groups. Negativity replaced optimism and performance dropped further. Teachers berated students, lowered expectations, spread negative rumors, and complained in the coffee room before school. The principal was constantly criticised and opposing him was one of the few things that united the divided faculty. Although this is an extreme case, it helps to look at toxic situations to learn how to change them and avoid them.

### Characteristics of Toxic Cultures

Toxic cultures actually have the same elements as positive cultures – values, rituals, stories, traditions, and an informal network of players. However, these features have a negative effect rather than a positive, uplifting one. The school becomes hostile and destructive as faculty end up attacking and sniping at meetings. Gripes, grudges, mistrust, and revenge abound. The most powerful staff members are negativists who tell disparaging stories. Anti-heroes are valued for their opposition. Feelings of hopelessness leave teachers with little energy for students or emotional connection to them. These toxic cultures are hard to change because people find meaning in negativity and anti-heroes unite people as well as heroes do.

### How Toxic Cultures Develop

There are many ways for toxic cultures to develop. It can happen as a result of the actions or inactions of the principal or other leaders, or it can occur over time as the beliefs of staff shift. Sometimes key people leave. Other times demographics shift. Or, sometimes there are top-down reforms and pressures that undermine the current culture. A new principal falls prey to creating a negative culture by failing to read the existing culture, not understanding the culture, or by not respecting beliefs and traditions that are deeply rooted in the school. Below are some examples of these different pathways to negativity:

- *Dropping cultural customs* – In one school a new principal wreaked havoc by ending faculty discussions at meetings, controlling the agenda, and criticizing the “frivolous” practice of recognizing small accomplishments.
- *Omitting opportunities to build trust* – One high school principal changed the master schedule, eliminating shared planning time for department members. Another principal simply forgot to build in time to share, talk, and problem solve in faculty meetings.
- *Ending valued rituals and ceremonies* – One principal moved the copier out of the main office and inadvertently ended the morning ritual of coffee, copying, and communication. At another school, faculty had brought home-baked goods to share on Fridays, but this ended when the principal didn’t make a schedule to organize it ending a key time to come together.
- *Failing to confront negative staff members* – In one large school, when the principal failed to confront a small yet vocal negative group of faculty, the situation deteriorated. Over time, the nay-sayers took control.

### Transforming Toxic Cultures

There is no one way to turn around negative cultures. Below are some measures that leaders can take:

- *Confront the negativity head on; give people a chance to vent in a public forum* – Listen to concerns and wait for more positive sentiments to emerge. Venting should always be followed by actions to help correct the problem.
- *Focus on the recruitment, selection, and retention of positive staff* -- Find and protect staff who believe in students. Find helpful senior staff and encourage them to become informal leaders of the culture. At the same time help toxic staff find other jobs.
- *Celebrate success* – Staff need to believe that things can get better. Tell stories of small successes that benefit students and share any positive results. This will help staff start to believe in themselves and counter a demoralizing culture.
- *Focus on eradicating the negative* -- Speak honestly and directly with staff who have a negative influence on the culture, let them know the impact of what they are doing, and coach them on how to stop.
- *Try dramatic measures* –At one school the principal became aware that the teachers had an attachment to ignorance. He borrowed a casket from a funeral home. Staff came to a meeting and were shocked. The principal began, “I have bad news. Last night ignorance died and we are here to send him to his resting place.” When everyone looked into the casket, there was a mirror on the bottom. The casket was then closed and taken away by a hearse. In a different school in which complaining was the norm, the principal invited everyone to a beach party. At the beach staff were told to write their negative thoughts about the school on a wooden plank. The principal asked everyone to read their plank and then throw the wooden planks into a bonfire, thus burning up negativity.

Transforming toxic cultures is challenging. However, with time, a school leader can build the elements of a more positive culture.

## Building Trust by Connecting to Parents and Communities

In the same way a school must build a foundation to develop a strong community *within* the school, it also takes a great deal of groundwork to develop a deep bond with parents and the outside community. One of the most consistent findings in the research on effective schools is the importance of family involvement. And while many schools attempt to involve parents through parent handbooks, back-to-school nights, newsletters, and other means, these actions are often more *mechanical*. The school goes through the motions of “parent involvement” but the actions are devoid of the shared meaning and values that really bring people together. To build an inviting, open-door school culture, the authors suggest a school must do the following:

### 1. Build Connections

When parents are seen as too meddlesome or apathetic, this has more to do with the culture of a school than the attitude of parents. These sentiments are often due to a lack of connection between school and home. A school needs to be deeply connected to the community through interactions, relationships, and activities. There should be time to talk, share, laugh, and tell stories about the children. Successful schools build this connection by:

*Convening* – bring parents and the community into the school. Proximity breeds understanding.

*Conveying* – use multiple sources of communication. Communication improves engagement.

*Collaborating* – involve parents in planning and decision making. Empowerment fosters respect.

*Conspiring* – work with parents to increase funding and gain resources. Conspiring encourages dialogue.

*Celebrating* – recognize and celebrate parents. Appreciation breeds trust.

For example, in one city school the demographics changed almost overnight to predominantly Korean families. Despite flyers and phone calls, parent involvement declined. At a faculty meeting a teacher suggested they learn some Korean. The principal was going to call Berlitz to set up lessons when another teacher suggested having the students tutor the teachers after school. Within two weeks of this new plan, parents started coming to the school to introduce themselves, ask about their children’s progress, and offer assistance.

### 2. Develop Respect

Developing respect is key to building ties with parents and community. Staff need to show this respect through their actions, words, and decisions. Respect is more than acceptance, it is a deeper sensitivity and appreciation of others – their values, beliefs, hopes, situations, and needs. In one elementary school in a Native American community a tree was struck by lightning. The principal realized that in the Navajo nation this had special significance and needed to be handled in a culturally sensitive way. By showing his respect for the traditions and beliefs of the parents he provided the symbolic leadership necessary to cement ties with families.

### 3. Build Trust

Trust is absolutely essential in building parent-school relationships. Parents want to trust that the school will do what is best for their children, but this does not happen automatically. It comes from the give-and-take of honest dialogue, open communication, and reliable positive interactions. It is important to remember that trust is hard to establish, easy to damage, and yet is one of the most important elements in meaningful parent and community ties. To build trust, schools must attend to:

*Time* – trust takes time so people get to know and each other.

*Tale-telling* – trust needs stories and legends to cement relationships.

*Traditions* – trust grows as families and the community see that positive traditions will continue.

### 4. Provide Recognition

The same way it is important to school culture that staff is recognized, celebration is also important in developing strong relationships with families and the community. Schools that bring parents in to help celebrate their children’s accomplishments create a culture of inclusion and connection. At one school parents are celebrated for the ways they help their children learn to read. At another school, parent volunteers are invited to a celebration lunch with long tables of food, banners, and a thermometer indicating the hundreds of hours they spent assisting the school.

### 5. Branding

In the business world, *branding* aims to connect the business viscerally with consumers. For example, the car company Saturn worked hard to build the reputation of its brand as “A Different Kind of Company. A Different Kind of Car.” By featuring employees and customers in its commercials, it established its unique character. A strong brand is a combination of facts and emotions. A brand conveys the core values of the institution and transforms that institution from an organization into a beloved institution. Because a school’s quality is too often associated with test scores, schools need to give parents a deeper sense of their accomplishments. Schools should consider developing their own unique, community-celebrating identity (its “brand”) by building relationships with parents and community. This allegiance will translate into true commitment, involvement, and trust.

## Eight Essential Roles for School Leaders to Strengthen Culture

Putting all the pieces together to create a strong and positive culture requires that leaders take two crucial steps: 1) read the current school culture and 2) take on several important leadership roles to help shape the culture.

### Reading the Current School Culture

Effective leaders read between the lines to figure out what is really going on in the school's culture. They understand the school's patterns, purposes, and history. Trying to change a culture without first understanding it is a recipe for stress and failure. To "read" the culture, leaders, together with staff, need to listen, watch, sense, and interpret in order to understand the values, assumptions, and traditions already in place. To help school leaders size up the current state of the culture, they can ask questions such as the following:

- Are staff and student work and accomplishments shared?
- What do people say (and think) when asked what the school stands for?
- What are people's hopes (spoken and unconscious) for the school's future?
- Who are the recognized (and unrecognized) heroes and villains of the school?
- What are the key ceremonies and stories of the school?
- What are the social rituals of interaction and support?
- What events are assigned special importance?
- How is conflict defined and handled?

### Shaping School Culture

Once school leaders have taken stock of the current culture, they should reinforce the valuable aspects of that culture and reshape and revitalize the problematic aspects. Without taking these actions, the existing ways of doing things will continue. The principal need not operate alone in reshaping culture. Ideally, the eight symbolic roles that help leaders shape school culture should be assumed by principals, teachers, staff, parents, and others. The eight essential leadership roles are below.

#### ***School Leaders as Historians***

At one school, a history of perceived failure led to a sense of hopelessness. Effective school leaders understand and help make sense of that past. One school, to track its past, made an organizational time line with the flow of events, ideas, and key people over the course of several decades.

#### ***School Leaders as Anthropological Sleuths***

Effective school leaders analyze the current traditions, values, and beliefs. They look for signs in the daily life of the school – in the symbols, artifacts, the secret ceremonies in the staff lounge, in the ritual greetings in hallways, and elsewhere. In one school teachers started wearing "Just Say No" badges from the DARE drug program. However, looking below the surface school leaders realized that they were not supporting drug awareness, they were advertising their resistance to curricular change at the school.

#### ***School Leaders as Visionaries***

School leaders use their knowledge of the past and current culture to paint a picture of the ideal school, a shared dream of what the school can become. To arrive at this shared vision, they listen closely for the cherished dreams that emerge from people's heads and hearts as they tell stories, make commentaries, and anywhere else these dreams bubble up.

#### ***School Leaders as Icons***

Through their dress, behavior, attention, and actions, school leaders affirm values. What leaders do, attend to, get excited about, or seem to appreciate all send powerful messages. Leaders are essentially cultural "teachers." Sometimes the symbolic significance of a leader's actions seep in slowly. One principal's routine morning "building tour" may serve as a functional task to look for problems, but eventually students and staff see the ritual as an expression that the principal cares about classrooms, teaching, students, and learning. Time is another important way a leader sends messages. The school community sees the difference between a leader's espoused and actual values based on how that leader spends time. At one school, the principal does an informal tally every Wednesday to estimate where she has spent her time so she can adjust and send the right messages for the remainder of the week. Students and staff are particularly aware of a leader's actions during times of crisis. Every aspect of behavior shapes a leader's public persona.

#### ***School Leaders as Potters***

In the same way a potter shapes clay, the school leader helps to shape the school's heroes, rituals, traditions, ceremonies, and symbols. Leaders can recognize individuals publicly with words, pictures, plaques, or special ceremonies. School leaders can also encourage rituals that celebrate important ideals. In one Florida school the staff meeting begins with a ritual storytelling about accomplishments, funny situations, and challenges overcome. Encouraging people to plan larger special school ceremonies is also an opportunity for leaders to help shape the culture of the school. At one school, the leaders encouraged parents to plan a celebration for the teachers.

#### ***School Leaders as Poets***

The school leader can use expressive language to convey important values. Leaders communicate using everything from memos to mottoes to stories, and the language they choose invokes different sentiments. "The achievement scores of my school are above the norm" conveys a different message than, "Our school is a special temple of learning." Whether students and staff think of the school as a factory or a family has significant implications for behavior.

#### ***School Leaders as Actors***

Every school has regular "social dramas" that play out. This drama may surface during regular routines or the untimely passing of a beloved teacher. Rather than inhibiting these dramas, school leaders can take the opportunity to reaffirm or redirect the school. For example, rather than ignore the closing of a school, a leader can plan a transition committee of teachers and community members to prepare for the event. Without acknowledging the feelings under the surface can lead to the development of toxic cultures.

#### ***School Leaders as Healers***

As healers, school leaders oversee transitions and heal the wounds of conflict and loss. Schools can celebrate natural transitions such as the beginning or end of the school year. Principals can take the opportunity during transitions in employment to reaffirm the school's culture and core values. They can do this when initiating new staff members and when seeing staff members leave.

## Living with Paradox – *The Bifocal Principal*

The authors believe our current state of education is in disarray. Our reforms have made schools more rational and efficient. However, schools need to revive their cultural and symbolic sides. To achieve this will require a profound shift in how school administrators think about schools and also their roles, as will be described in this chapter. In focusing too much on the structural and technical sides of schools, school leaders have neglected the spiritual side. Instead, they need to seek a balance between rationality and spirituality. Many administrators take a dualistic approach and believe they need to choose one approach over the other – to focus on either the technical or the symbolic aspects of their work. However, problems in schools are complex and often involve *both* a technical and spiritual approach. While it may seem both challenging and paradoxical, school leaders can manage people, time, and instruction at the same time that they infuse a school with passion, purpose, and meaning. To be successful, school leaders need to merge different, seemingly conflicting roles as is described below. In one study of highly effective leaders a high school principal (Paul Morris) showed how he was able to respond to the paradoxes of leadership below:

- *The paradox of role expectations:* On one hand, Morris let the teachers shape their own roles and be in charge of their own work. He didn't collect lesson plans and let them purchase their own supplies. On the other hand, teachers were held accountable for assigned tasks. The teachers had clear roles but Morris let them find new ways to accomplish their tasks.
- *The paradox of performance:* On one hand Morris expects people to do things right. On the other hand he understands that problems are normal occurrences and accepts them. He balances working to avoid problems with the knowledge that problems occur.
- *The paradox of pride:* Morris's teachers have high standards and believe their school to be one of the best in the state. However, the staff is always looking for new ways to become better.
- *The paradox of control:* Morris is in control of things, yet he relinquishes control of that which he has no control. He also hires good teachers and relinquishes control on the inside, too. However, he knows what is going on within the school.
- *The paradox of concern:* Morris exudes caring, but at the same time he is tough. He has clear standards and dismissed a teacher who could not manage a class. He cares for individual teachers, yet he rearranged schedules that teachers had long enjoyed.

In addition to the paradoxes identified above, below are some of the many others that school leaders confront in their work:

- *Plans must always be revised. Plan carefully.* Any new efforts require planning. However, unpredictable surprises mean that planning needs to change along the way and flexibility is required.
- *If you keep changing, you will never get it right. Keep changing.* To be successful, schools need to continuously improve. However, schools need stability to perfect their current practices.
- *Education is serious work. Lighten up and have fun.* Hard work needs to be combined with comical moments and fun.
- *Test scores are the true measure of educational outcome. Use test scores as one of many measures.* Don't ignore test scores, but don't be consumed by them.
- *Don't make snap decisions. Act before you are sure.* If you leap before you look, plans can go awry. If you spend too much time looking, paralysis prevents anything from happening.

These paradoxes challenge schools leaders every day. However, they find ways to blend and balance both the technical and symbolic issues to create schools that are technically sound *as well as* symbolically attuned.

## Achieving Balance – *Meeting Cultural and Structural Demands*

As stated previously, the authors are of the opinion that the *culture* of schools has been wounded because of the enormous emphasis on teaching to the tests. The challenge, therefore, is to restore the balance between this rigor and the vigor that will help revive the school's culture. But how, given the constraints on a principal's time, can the culture be restored while maintaining the technical efficiency? This can happen because there is enormous overlap in the functional and symbolic actions school leaders take. Many of the symbolic efforts serve the school's functional needs and vice versa.

For example, while we may think of communication as a *technical* action designed to inform everyone, it can also serve symbolic purposes. When meetings start with storytelling or memos contain children's drawings these serve to strengthen the school's culture as well. On the other hand, we may think of rituals as a means of improving school *culture* but rituals have a *functional* side as well by helping to regulate behavior. Rituals, in fact, may be more effective in guiding behavior because when a rule is broken this results in answering to one person in authority whereas violating a ritual invites social sanctions from everyone. Like this example, there are numerous other examples of symbolic actions that are in fact more *functional* because of their symbolic value. For example, memoranda are often downright boring and often end up in the trash. However, by adding pizzazz, memoranda can actually become more functional. Effective schools are those that are able to balance both structural and cultural needs. They know how to make routines dramatic and rituals functional at the same time. Symbolic and technical perspectives, rather than competing, combine to create a high-quality school with deep values and efficient ways.

Leaders have a crucial challenge ahead of them. They need to restore a number of important elements that have been lost in schools – the importance of purpose, people, caring, and commitment. Once again teachers need to believe in themselves and their ability to make a difference. School cultures are complex systems. School leaders need the skills and knowledge to revive the culture's history, uncover the current conditions and values, and act as symbolic leaders who reinforce important values in their daily work. Doing this work will help to create a school that is much more than a building with instructional materials, but rather an institution with history, values, purpose, pride, stories, and beliefs.

## The Main Idea's Professional Development Suggestions: Improve Your School's Culture

### I. Take Stock of the Current State of Your School's Culture

The first part of the book covers the different elements that make up school culture – from symbols to ceremonies. It is essential to understand the current state of your school's culture before you can improve it. Alone, or, with your leadership team, examine each of these school culture components. To answer these questions you can: do a walk-through, discuss these questions with staff, or send out a survey.

- *Artifacts* – Look at your school's banners, posters, student work, awards, and other symbols – what do these convey about your school's values?
- *Architecture* – Take a walk through your school. Visually, what does the building convey about your school's community, commitments, and values? Is the entrance inviting to students? Staff? Parents? What kind of condition are the grounds in – clean? Well-kept? How does your facility reflect your specific school and community?
- *Living logos* – Consider sending out a survey to staff members to ask them what messages you, the principal, are sending:
  - \* What types of activities does the principal seem to spend the MOST and LEAST amount of time on?
  - \* What types of educational ideas does the principal focus on more?
  - \* What seems to be the principal's top agenda items? Biggest concern?
  - \* What ideas are valued and what tone comes across in the principal's written communications (memos, emails, etc.)?
- *History* – How (if at all) is the history of the school kept alive? Is there a founding story and are staff aware of it? What crucial events in the school's past have had an effect on the current culture (unresolved conflicts, strong staff personalities, significant changes in policies or programs or staffing)? See a more complete list of questions on p.3 of the summary.
- *Mission* – Is staff aware of the mission? Is there any tangible reminder of the mission (e.g., a banner, a copy signed by everyone in the hallway)? What norms (which reflect values and beliefs) guide the school – see the examples on p.4 of the summary.
- *Storytelling* – What are the key stories of the school? Are there any structured times set aside for storytelling (e.g., at the start of weekly staff meetings)? Do the school leaders tell stories to make strong points? Is storytelling valued at the school?
- *Rituals and Ceremonies* – What special events does the school hold each year? How, if at all, are students, staff, parents, and the work they've accomplished celebrated? What regular rituals are practiced at the school? List any of the following types of rituals or ceremonies at your school: greeting rituals, transition rituals, opening day ceremonies, battle-preparation rituals, and recognition ceremonies.
- *Informal staff roles* – Who are the staff members who have a hand in conveying the culture either in a positive or negative way (the heroes, the anti-heroes, the gossips, the spies, etc.)?

### II. Plan to Transform or Improve Your School Culture

In order to get buy-in from your staff to improve school culture, it is helpful if they understand how important school culture is. Below are some ideas to get them thinking about school culture:

- *Visit another school with a compelling school culture* – By taking staff (or a subset of staff) on a field trip to another school the goal is *not* to copy their culture but rather to get a sense of how different things can be when you change the culture of a school.
  - *Have staff read a selection from the book* – Give the staff part of the summary or sections of the book to help them think about the importance of culture. They can read the book's Introduction or some quotes from it, and then discuss them. Below are a few:
    - “If only schools would be run more like businesses.” Perhaps they could read the anecdote about Starbucks (pp.1-3) which disputes this notion, “In business, one thing is crystal clear: the *culture* of an enterprise plays a dominant role in exemplary performance.”
    - “What were once joyful places of promise and hope have too often become mechanized factories bent on producing only a small fraction of what a well-education person needs and what the community wants. As a U.S. Department of Education spokesperson remarked in 2007, “If it can't be measured, we're not interested in it.” (p.4 in the book)
    - “This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools [culture] is often overlooked and consequently is usually absent from discussions about school improvement.” (p.6 in the book)
    - One definition of culture: “School cultures are complex webs of traditions and rituals built up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crises and accomplishments.” (p.7 in the book)
    - “The past is closer to us than it often seems to be. It affects us more than we think... What went before not only shapes the present, it also outlines the future... All people and institutions are the product of history... whether they are aware of it or not, all people use history when they make choice about the present.” (p.45 in the book)
- Staff can also read a case study of a school that illustrates the power of school culture (Ganado Primary (pp.19-31) and Adlai E. Stevenson (pp.134-8) and discuss which aspects of these cultures they found to be compelling.
- *Brainstorm ways to improve your own school's culture for the coming year* – Look through each element of culture in Part I above and brainstorm ideas with a leadership team or other staff. You probably can't build a new building, but can you paint in bright colors, pick up trash, invest in curtains and plants? Can you encourage parents or a science teacher to plant a small patch outside with flowers? Can you have teachers create a video chronicling your school's history to keep it alive? Read about the superintendent (p.3 of the summary) who had staff present the history of the decade they started working to each other. Can you design a kick-off event that encourages staff to remember and share the school's history as a foundation upon which to start the new school year? How might you institutionalize storytelling this year – by reserving the first 10 minutes of staff meetings for it? Creating an annual event like the “Pits and Berries” tradition (on p.4)? Re-read the summary with a pen and underline examples of culture building you might want to adapt your school (the “I can read guaranteed” t-shirts on p.2 or the casket to bury ignorance on p.7 are some personal favorites of mine).

### III. Living with Paradox – The Bifocal Principal

Improving school culture is much more than adding a few rituals. To truly understand the nuances involved in attending to your school's structural and cultural needs at the same time I suggest a group of principals or leaders within a school read this chapter (pp.217-232) and share concrete examples of times they have personally faced any of these paradoxes of leadership and how they approached the issue.