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The ability to use that unique combination of analytical and people skills to develop and maintain core beliefs may be the consummate skill of leaders in the 1990s.

Developing a Strong Culture: Leadership Holds the Key

Jim Sweeney

More than a decade ago, results of a major study provided evidence that school socio-cultural variables may significantly affect student learning and that school social climate variables and social structure variables explained differences between schools in achievement as well (Brookover, et al, 1979). A study of 68 Michigan elementary schools provided evidence that members of a school social system become socialized to behave in ways that affect the productivity of the school. This was further corroborated in a longitudinal study of twelve English high schools where the researchers concluded that the ethos of the school separated the more effective from the less effective schools (Rutter, et al, 1979). During the 1980s, climate appeared on the short list of those initiating school improvement. It has recently been joined by a similar concept, culture. Yet despite the incredible potential these concepts hold for improving schools, they are largely misunderstood and underutilized. There is a need for greater clarity, for propositions to guide those who seek to improve the work environment of schools, and for more tangible approaches to improving the climate and culture of schools.

It is important to understand the differences between climate and culture. It is equally important to understand how the concepts intertwine to influence school productivity. The organization's lifeblood is the energy that flows from the interaction of students, teachers, administrators and others who enter the organization's subsystems. Like individuals, schools have personalities that influence their behavior. The climate of the school reflects one facet of personality, self image, and how the school feels about itself. There is considerable evidence that self image influences the decisions individuals make about their work, the effort they extend after making those decisions, and the length of time they persist in the effort (Bandura, 1972, 1982, 1986).

Climate can be measured. Schools, like people, can increase their effectiveness and enhance their potential through self assessment. An instrument that measures important elements of the school personality and is of appropriate length provides baseline information and can be used

to target areas for growth. Since personality assessment is very sensitive, care should be taken to assure confidentiality and anonymity to those providing data. It is also important to administer the instrument at a time when those in the organization are not subject to great stress, and to measure its real personality rather than temporary attitudes resulting from a recent episode or activity that affected how people feel.

Culture reflects a set of the personality's psychological characteristics that go beyond attitude. At the deepest level these characteristics represent strongly held beliefs, values, and assumptions. The needs and desires of the group result in norms of day-to-day behavior and the types of decisions organizations make on a day-to-day basis (Kilmann, 1989). A school's culture can be strong or weak, positive or negative. If the majority of the staff has strong beliefs and values, what occurs in that school will usually be a result of this strong culture and will not change easily. If these beliefs about people and what should be done to promote excellence are positive, it is likely that individuals in the school will behave in a manner to maximize learning opportunities for students. In a weak culture the lack of strong beliefs and values typically results in fragmented or unpredictable staff behavior. Assessing the culture of the school is equally complex but perhaps more fruitful. The norms of behavior, what most people do and are expected to do, can be observed by those who live and work in the school. They can also be measured by an instrument that asks respondents about people's behavior, rather than how people feel about the school.

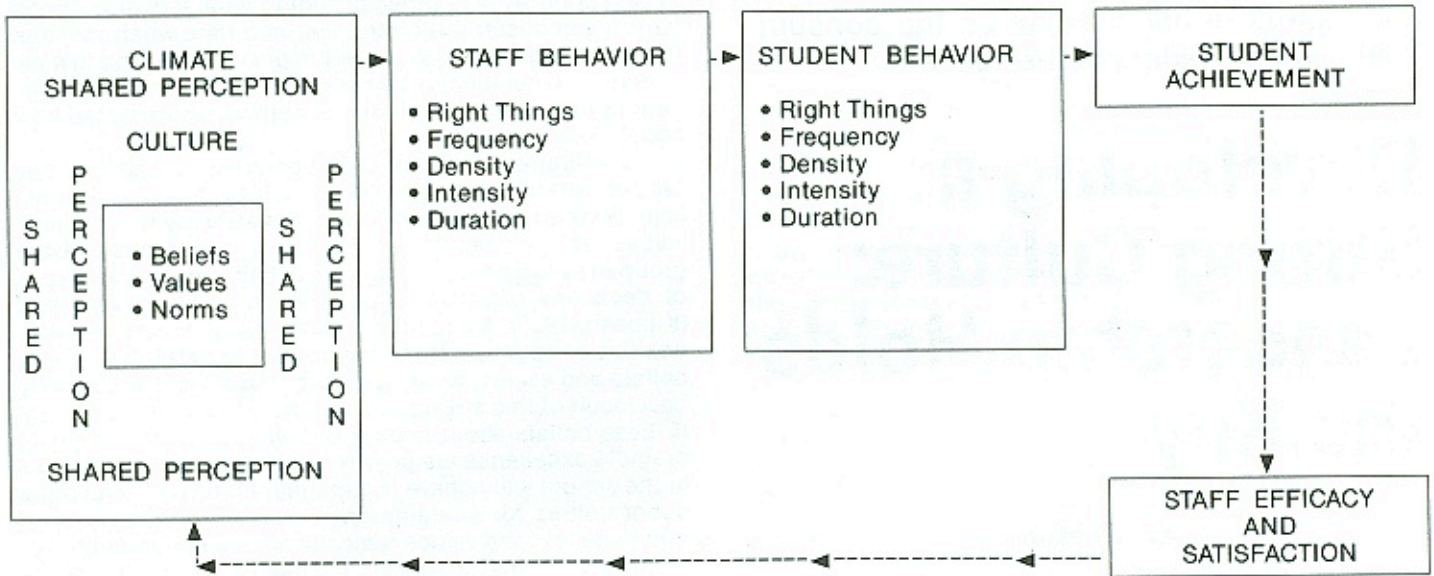
Both climate and culture, then, are related to organizational behavior because they link attitudes and beliefs to motivation and work-related behavior. There is, moreover, a reciprocal relationship between the concepts. Self image, the perceptions of the school's self, is linked to deeply held beliefs about people and what the people in the school should be doing. If positive beliefs and values are aligned with what the school is doing, the self image or climate is positive. Where beliefs and values are negative or unaligned, the climate is not as positive. It also seems likely that school climate operates at a baseline driven or led by the culture. A deep history of strong positive beliefs and values will generate a positive self image, even though that self image may fluctuate as it is influenced by positive or negative daily factors or events. When the effects of the events wear off, however, the climate will return to the baseline feeling.

Figure 1 shows how culture influences productivity in a school. Beliefs and values about the way things *ought to be* (values) influence what people *do* in the school (right things), the *number* of staff members who do it (density), the *vigor* with which they do it (intensity), and the *length* of time they do it (duration). These factors influence students in much the same manner and ultimately influence student achievement, teachers' sense of efficacy, and teachers' satisfaction.

Thus, constant systematic attention to developing a positive culture is a key to ensuring the long-term effectiveness of a school. To enhance the culture one must first understand how culture is formed. The culture of the school or school district is influenced by its *deep history* that emanates from environmental and organizational factors that interact over an extended period of time (see Figure 2). Environmental factors may play a more powerful role in schools than in many business or other types of organizations because the school is more likely to draw its employees and clients from the neighborhood it serves than are many other types of organizations. Thus the school, typically a micro-

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FIGURE 1
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE, CULTURE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



cosm of the community or neighborhood, has deeply ingrained beliefs, values, and norms unique to that community or neighborhood. School leaders must understand that *social* factors have a powerful influence on how the school functions as an organization. The strength of the *economy* and the degree and control and pressure of *political* forces also influence staff members' deeply held internal images of the way the world works. While these factors interact within the environment, they also influence the culture by interacting with forces within the *organization*: staff make-up, leaders, structures, processes and events. *Staff make-up* is critical. While in some schools staff has been drawn from the local community, in others they reflect a much broader spectrum of America and thus bring a more varied, less pervasive belief system to their work. The age distribution of the staff, its internal leaders, and other factors are equally important. The leadership, structures, and processes which permeate life in the organization over a period of time have a powerful effect on the culture. Significant or dramatic *events* that had a dramatic effect on the school influence how people think and behave in the school for an extended period.

Shaping the Culture

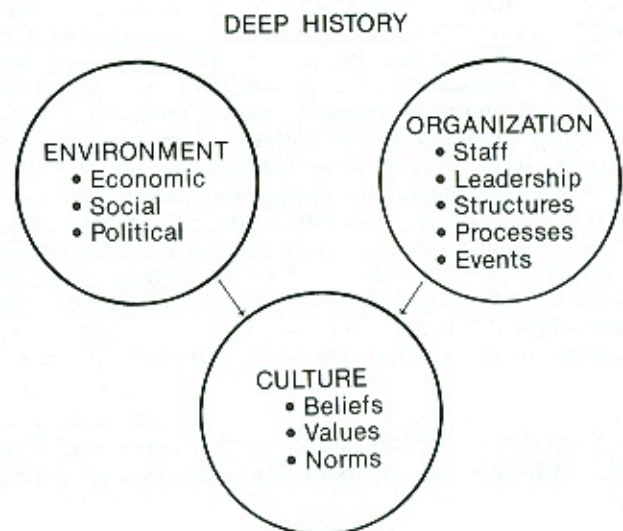
Shaping the culture, particularly a strong culture, is a complex long-term activity. It is a process rather than an event. Some contend that culture resists any change attempts (Wilkins and Paterson, 1985). Research at Iowa State University (Taylor, 1989; Hedrick, 1990) indicates that school culture can be transformed. This research also indicates that the key organizational elements that must be addressed are communication, decision-making, and support. Decision making is important because successful involvement enhances the belief that one has control over one's life. Participation in group decision-making and other activities promotes group cohesiveness and the control that marks strong cultures. Communication provides the vehicle for sharing information and beliefs and values, and also enhances self esteem and reduces anxiety. Finally, support enhances self esteem, trust, respect, caring and self-efficacy—core values in a strong positive culture. Four factors are key in shaping or transforming that cul-

ture: (1) structures, (2) processes, (3) reinforcement, and (4) leadership.

Structures

Structures are components designed to bring stakeholders together to enhance communication, coordination, collaboration, decision making, support, sharing or togetherness. Schools historically have been organized as egg crates creating pockets of isolation (Lortie, 1975). While recent reform efforts have resulted in some important changes, the organizational structure of most schools impedes communication and participation in decision making and provides few opportunities or activities that provide support. Structures must be changed where possible or additional structures added. These structures can include vertical teams, staff development or other support teams, quality circles, school improvement teams, program effectiveness teams, lead teachers, peer coaching, and many more.

FIGURE 2
FACTORS INFLUENCING CULTURE



Processes

Meetings or group activities that waste people's time or those that allow group members to become involved in acrimonious debate foster beliefs and values that block motivation and productive group functioning. When groups come together to achieve a common goal it is important that they follow certain guidelines or use processes that enhance the quality of the interaction and the benefits to them and others. These processes typically promote listening and a safe environment, promote creativity and critical thinking, and ensures that decisions are arrived at democratically. These processes play a vital role in shaping the climate by promoting group values. The faculty of the school should be able to choose from a repertoire of strategies that provides an opportunity for each staff member to participate, minimizes disruption or domination by group members, and ensures that decisions reflect consensus or majority opinion. Included in the variety of these processes are nominal group, delphi dialogue, SOPPADA, and cooperative processing. These and other similar processes should become part of the repertoire a staff uses on a regular basis. Principals must ensure that they and other staff members have the knowledge and skills to use these methods.

Reinforcement

Most would agree that "what gets rewarded gets done," and that negative reinforcement tends to extinguish inappropriate behavior. Both have important implications for shaping the culture. Beliefs, values, and norms are strongly influenced by the reactions of others to behavior in the workplace. If appropriate or exemplary behavior is recognized and rewarded by the principal and others, most staff members are inclined to emulate that behavior to receive a similar award. When inappropriate behavior is met with punishment or silent disapproval by others, few choose a similar reward. The principal's role in dealing with inappropriate behavior is crucial. Failure to deal with inappropriate behavior tends to create the belief that either the belief is acceptable or that nobody cares, or that nobody can do anything about it, thus creating a powerful negative belief. Where the culture becomes strong and positive, reinforcement for positive and negative behavior comes from a number of staff members—the most powerful method of creating positive norms.

Leadership

What it all boils down to is leadership. Selecting and implementing the proper structures, processes, and utilizing effective reinforcement strategies requires good judgment and skills. Effectiveness is contingent on three criteria: appropriateness, quality, and timing. Structures, processes, and reinforcement must fit the unique situation and the individuals of the school, be of top flight quality, and be implemented and utilized at the correct time.

The final task of the principal is to provide symbolic leadership. Symbolic leadership is anchored to a basic proposition: Beliefs and values of normal types are influenced by what individuals in the school **see, hear, say** and **do**. While the deep history of the school and the background of each staff member act as a filter, the principal must manage the environment and symbols that create and maximize opportunities to develop positive beliefs. This environment begins by identifying the core beliefs and values needed to lead or drive the culture. These core beliefs and values could include: a sense of efficacy, control, respect, caring, trust, collegiality, and self esteem. Posters, pictures, buttons, logos, and other artifacts that reflect core beliefs and values should be prominently displayed where they can be

seen on a daily basis. The main office, classrooms, halls, and entrances are key areas. There is also the need to model behaviors that reinforce key beliefs and for others to model these behaviors at ceremonies and other important functions. The ear is also a conduit for beliefs—what we hear influences how we think. The principal must take great care to reinforce key beliefs both in what is said at meetings, ceremonies and informal conversations and while "managing by wandering around." Finally, creating opportunities for staff to participate in activities and share beliefs with others is most powerful.

The use of symbols to create beliefs is tricky business. Misuse can be construed with manipulation or merely have little effect on the culture. Six factors serve as a guide to symbolic leadership: (1) clarity, (2) focus, (3) consistency, (4) emotion, (5) timing, and (6) duration. Symbols must clearly communicate and reinforce beliefs and have a consistent central focus. The sense of timing for employing symbols that appeal to the base needs and emotions of staff is also critical. And finally, symbolic leadership like any activity that makes a difference must be practiced over a long period of time.

Final Thoughts

Climate and culture consist of the conclusions a group of people draw from their experience. The day-to-day feeling or climate is important. The school's culture consists of what people believe about what works and what does not and how students, teachers, parents and other staff should treat each other. That culture can and must be managed. A positive culture provides the force for producing world-class schools and also provides an enriching environment for students and staff who spend many hours in the school. Structures, processes and reinforcement provide a framework for managing that culture. But leadership provides the key. The ability to use that unique combination of analytical and people skills to develop and maintain core beliefs may be the consummate skill of leaders in the 1990s. It may also spell the difference between success and failure in America's schools. It seems worth the effort.

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