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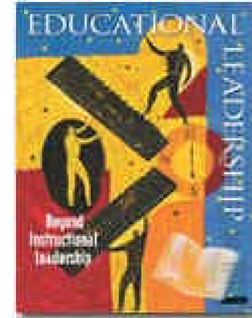

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The Culture Builder

Roland S. Barth

Changing a toxic school culture into a healthy school culture that inspires lifelong learning among students and adults is the greatest challenge of instructional leadership.

Probably the most important—and the most difficult—job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school. The school's culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, "the way we do things around here." 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. One cannot, of course, change a school culture alone. But one can provide forms of leadership that invite others to join as observers of the old and architects of the new. The effect must be to transform what we did last September into what we would like to do next September.

The culture of a school is apparent to the newcomer. In one school, a beginning teacher stands up in a faculty meeting to express her views to the others on, say, pupil evaluation. Her contribution is received with mockery, cold stares, and put-downs. "Who does she think she is?" As the new teacher quickly learns, the culture at her school dictates that newcomers must not speak until they have experienced, for at least two or three years, the toil and tedium of the old-timers. "That's the way we do things around here." And she learns that cruel and unusual punishments await those who violate the cultural taboos of the school.

In another school, a high school student is tormented by his peers for studying on the day of the football game. And, indeed, the culture in many schools dictates that learning is not "cool" on Saturdays—or on any day of the week, for that matter.

In yet another school, a teacher encounters trouble managing a class full of difficult youngsters. Within a few days, every other teacher in the building knows of her problem—and volunteers to help. In the same school, when a student is experiencing difficulty with an assignment or a new concept, several fellow students step in to assist. "That's the way we do things around here."

A school's culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. It is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act.

Every school has a culture. Some are hospitable, others toxic. A school's culture can work for or

against improvement and reform. Some schools are populated by teachers and administrators who are reformers, others by educators who are gifted and talented at subverting reform. And many school cultures are indifferent to reform.

And all school cultures are incredibly resistant to change, which makes school improvement—from within or from without—usually futile. Unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of a school, all innovations, high standards, and high-stakes tests will have to fit in and around existing elements of the culture. They will remain superficial window dressing, incapable of making much of a difference.

To change the culture requires that the instructional leader become aware of the culture, the way things are done here. What do you see, hear, and experience in the school? What don't you see and hear? What are the clues that reveal the school's culture? What behaviors get rewards and status? Which ones are greeted with reprimands? Do the adults model the behavior they expect of students? Who makes the decisions? Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school?

Nondiscussables

An important part of awareness is attending to "nondiscussables." Nondiscussables are subjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations take place only in the parking lot, the rest rooms, the playground, the car pool, 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. The nondiscussable is the elephant in the living room. Everyone knows that this huge pachyderm is there, right between the sofa and the fireplace, but we go on mopping and dusting and vacuuming around it as if it did not exist.

Each school has its own nondiscussables. For one it is "the leadership of the principal." For another, it is "the way decisions are made here." For many it is "race" or "the underperforming teacher." Schools are full of these land mines from which trip wires emanate. We walk about carefully, trying not to detonate them. Yet by giving these nondiscussables this incredible power over us, by avoiding them at all cost, we issue the underperforming teacher a license to continue this year as he did last year, taking a heavy toll on countless students and other teachers. We deprive the principal of honest, timely feedback and thereby continue to suffer from poor leadership. We condemn ourselves to live with all the debilitating tensions that surround race.

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. 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. No mean task, for as one principal put it, "These nondiscussables are the third rail of school leadership."

Changing the Culture

It is said that a fish would be the last creature on earth to discover water, so totally and continuously immersed in it is he. The same might be said of those working within the school culture. By the time a beginning teacher waits the obligatory three years to speak in a faculty meeting, she, too, is likely to be so immersed in the culture that she will no longer be able to see with a beginner's clarity the school's cultural patterns of leadership, competition, fearfulness, self-interest, or lack of support.

To change the culture requires that more desirable qualities replace the existing unhealthy

elements. Clear personal and collective visions are crucial for this enterprise. Educators Saphier and King identified a dozen healthy cultural norms: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to the knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, caring celebration and humor, involvement in decision making, protection of what's important, traditions, and honest and open communication.[1] These qualities dramatically affect the capacity of a school to improve—and to promote learning.

To change a school's culture requires mustering the courage and skill to not remain victimized by the toxic of the elements school's culture and to address them instead. Culture building requires the will to transform the elements of school culture into forces that support rather than subvert the school's purposes. Of course, these acts violate the taboos of many school cultures, which is why culture changing is the most important, difficult, and perilous job of school-based reformers.

E. B. White observed, "A person must have something to cling to. Without that we are as a pea vine sprawling in search of a trellis." We educators need a trellis to keep us off the ground in the face of the cold rains and hot winds that buffet the schoolhouse. The trellis of our profession—and the most crucial element of school culture—is an ethos hospitable to the promotion of human learning.

Learning Curves off the Chart

The ability to learn prodigiously from birth to death sets human beings apart from other forms of life. The greatest purpose of school is to unlock, release, and foster this wonderful capability.

Schools exist to promote learning in all their inhabitants. Whether we are teachers, principals, professors, or parents, our primary responsibility is to promote learning in others and in ourselves. That responsibility sets educators apart from insurance salespeople, engineers, and doctors. To the extent that our activities in school are dedicated to getting learning curves off the chart, what we do is a calling. To the extent that we spend most of our time doing something else in school, we are engaged in a job.

Recent school reforms are an invitation—may, a demand—to examine every school policy, practice, and decision and ask, What, if anything, of importance is anyone learning as a consequence of doing that? Who learns what from ability grouping? Who learns what from letter grades of A, B, and C? Who learns what from having 26 students in a class? Who learns what from the annual practice of principals evaluating teachers? We created the myriad school practices that now clutter a school's culture because at some time someone believed that this policy, practice, or procedure was capable of getting someone's learning curve off the chart.

The instructional leader must assist the faculty in taking continual, fresh inventory of these and other habituated practices encrusted in our schools' cultures and in categorizing them. Some—such as the practice of providing individual instruction or giving students immediate feedback on their work—seem undeniably associated with promoting learning. Keep those. Others—such as ability grouping or parent nights—we may need to study to determine just what effect, if any, they are having on people's learning. Still other practices—perhaps faculty meetings or intrusive announcements over the loudspeaker—appear to contribute to no one's learning—or may even impede learning—and need to be scrapped. A final category is for the activities that must continue but in a more successful way.

Residing in all the stakeholders in schools—parents, teachers, students, principals—are wonderful, fresh, imaginative ideas about a better way. Achieving that better way takes recognition of and moral outrage at ineffective practices, confidence that there is a better way, and the courage and invention to find that way and implement it. Whose learning curve goes off the chart by doing that? is a revolutionary question whose time has finally come.

At-Risk Students

Unhealthy school cultures tend to beget at-risk students—students who leave school before or after graduation with little possibility of continuing learning.

I remember visiting a high school just after the last spring exams and before graduation. As I approached the school grounds, I saw a group of students standing around a roaring fire, to which they were heartily contributing. I went over and asked, "What's up?"

"We're burning our notes and our books," replied one. "We're outta here!"

On further conversation, I learned that these students were not from the bottom ability group, but rather A, B, and C students, many headed for college.

That fire continues to smolder within me. I wonder how many of our students not so labeled are in fact at risk, with little possibility of continuing learning. How many of them graduate from our schools and exult in the belief that they have learned all they ever need or intend to know?

One reason that those students were burning those books, literally, and that so many more students burn their books figuratively at the end of the school year is that lurking beneath the culture of most schools is a chilling message: Learn or we will hurt you. Educators have taken learning—a wonderful, spontaneous capacity of all human beings—and coupled it with punitive measures. We have developed an arsenal of sanctions and punishments that we inextricably link with learning experiences. "Johnny, if you don't learn your multiplication tables, you're going to have to repeat 4th grade." "Mary, if you don't improve your compositions, I'm not going to write a favorable recommendation for college." "Tom, if your standardized test scores don't improve, you don't graduate." And so it goes. What those students burning their books are really telling us is, "You can't hurt me anymore."

But so closely have we coupled learning and punishment that the students throw one into the fire with the other. School cultures in which students submit to learning, and to the threats of punishment for not learning, generate students who want to be finished with learning when they graduate. And, of course, this applies to adults as well. The state tells the teacher or principal, "Unless you complete 15 hours of continuing education credits this year, we will not renew your certification." Learn or we will hurt you.

An immense challenge to the instructional leader—and to our profession—is to find ways to uncouple learning and punishment. We must change the message to students—and to their educators—from "Learn or we will hurt you" to "Learn or you will hurt yourself." Students who burn their books and their notes and celebrate the conclusion of their learning will be relegated to the periphery of the 21st century. Those who will thrive in the years ahead, in contrast, will be those who have become—during their school experience—active, voracious, independent, lifelong learners. The nature of the workplace, our society, and learning dictates that we need to learn as we go along, or we won't survive.

Yearning for Learning

The most important requirement for graduation—whether from 4th, 9th, or 12th grade—is some evidence that this student is becoming or has become an independent, lifelong learner. We must look closely at what students choose to do with their own time. What evidence is there of enduring intellectual passion in this student? Is the student capable of posing questions, marshaling resources, and pursuing learning with dedication, independence, imagination, and courage?

If your school has succeeded in getting 95 percent of its students scoring at the 95th percentile

on standardized tests, and if, at the same time, students are leaving a teacher, a grade, or the school "burning their books" and saying "I'm done with this stuff; I'm outta here," then you have won a battle but lost the war. The price of short-term success is long-term failure. Enhancement of performance has led to a curtailment of lifelong learning. The school has failed in its most important mission—to create and provide a culture hospitable to human learning and to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners. This is what instructional leadership is all about.

"Our School Is a Community of Learners!" How many times do we see and hear this assertion? It is both an ambitious, welcome vision and an empty promissory note. The vision is, first, that the school will be a community, a place full of adults and students who care about, look after, and root for one another and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need and in times of celebration. Every member of the community holds some responsibility for the welfare of every other and for the welfare of the community as a whole. Schools face tremendous difficulty in fulfilling this definition of a community. More are organizations, institutions, or bureaucracies.

As if community were not ambitious enough, the defining, underlying culture of this community is learning. The condition for membership in the community is that one learns, continues to learn, and supports the learning of others. Everyone. A tall order to fill, and one to which few schools aspire and even fewer attain.

When we come to believe that our schools should be providing a culture that creates and sustains a community of student and adult learning—that this is the trellis of our profession—then we will organize our schools, classrooms, and learning experiences differently. Show me a school where instructional leaders constantly examine the school's culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I'll show you students who do just fine on those standardized tests.

Endnote

[1] Saphier, J., & King, M. (1985). Good seeds grow in strong cultures. Educational Leadership, 42(6), 67–74.

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Roland S. Barth is a former teacher, principal, and member of the faculty of Harvard University, where he founded the Harvard Principals' Center and the International Network of Principals' Centers.

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