

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING HIGH-TRUST AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOL CULTURES

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Abstract: Based on a varied and relevant literature overview, this paper discusses the close connection between leadership and organizational culture; analyzes the types of organizational cultures and signs of a strong healthy organizational culture; provides several leadership strategies with regard to improving understanding of organizational culture; and gives guidelines to building high-trust and effective school cultures.

Keywords: leadership, organizational culture, types of organizational cultures, leadership strategies, and high-trust and effective school cultures

The Close Connection between Leadership and Organizational Culture

The connection between leadership and culture is so close that "leadership and culture may be two sides of the same coin" (Senge, 2000, quoting Edgar Schein).

There are four major ways to change an education organization: strategy, culture, human processes and structures. All of these are important for transformative change for 21st century education (or beyond), and all of them depend on leadership. That is probably the reason why leadership development is the No. 1 priority worldwide of top organizational leaders inside and outside of education.

Leadership is about leading -- but within the context of an organization. Leaders arise out of the culture of the place in which they lead, and do not exist separately from that culture. If leadership involves leading, the same must be true of leaders within organizations. Individually and together, these leaders comprise the core leadership of the school district—that group of individuals hired or promoted out of the culture of the organization itself with targeted responsibility for forwarding the purpose and performance of the organization. Once in place, these leaders—again individually and together as a core leadership team—begin to influence the culture of the organization they lead.

In the educational organization, it is the leadership team that entertains and decides upon the kinds of strategy, structural and human process changes that will flavor the future character and capacity of the education system--always while influencing the culture of the organization in place. The "edge" is in surfacing the connection between leadership strategies and school cultures.

The Types of Organizational Culture

Terence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy (1982) in "*Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*" clarified four types of culture, which are *Through-*

Person; Work Hard/Play Hard; Bet Your Company; and Process. As we, all know, since the organizational cultures changed a lot during recent 20 years, this clarification of cultures is not descriptive and inclusive enough as far as the present organizational cultures are concerned. Therefore, to learn more about the organizational culture profiles in recent research is very necessary for studying educational leadership.

As many researchers, like Edgar Schein, Terry Deal and Rob Cooke suggested that within organizational culture is the often hidden sets of norms and expectations that underlie what people 'expect' and see as 'expected of them' when they come to work or study. It is the set of often unspoken interactions, relationships and expectations that spell out 'how we do businesses around here'. It also indicated that every organization might have their own special organizational culture, depending on what national cultures they are from, what individual personalities they have, and what kinds of area their organization belongs to. Therefore, it is not easy for clarify organizational culture "styles" or types of culture in details.

The Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire--Rutgers Secondary (OCDQ-Rs), a revision by Kottkamp et al. (1987) of the original OCDQ developed by Halpin and Croft (1963), was used to measure teacher perceptions of the climate in their schools Organizational Climate. The climate subscales are categorized as *Supportive Principal Behavior, Directive Principal Behavior, Engaged Teacher Behavior, Frustrated Teacher Behavior, and Intimate Teacher Behavior*.

While, Kathy Ohm (2006) categorized types of organizational culture differently, as stated in her paper "Leadership and Culture":

- **Constructive organizational cultures** promote achievement, self-actualization and mutual encouragement.
- **Defensive organizational cultures** can be passive or aggressive.
- **Passive defensive organizational cultures** promote low effort, and show a negative correlation with high performance and innovative solutions.
- **Aggressive organizational cultures** promote bullying, hierarchical thinking, and long hours spent on very narrowly defined objectives.

As we can see, there are so many different ways and there must also be many other ways to interpret the types of organizational culture, and this provides students and teachers in the field of educational leadership a good direction and opportunity to do further research.

Signs of a Strong Healthy Organizational Culture

As a leader, culture in an organization provides the framework within which you work every day. Healthy cultures with positive interactions, important traditions and avenues to celebrate the organization make it joyful to go to work. However, what are the signs of a strong healthy

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culture? In an online piece from "American Society for Training and Development Journal" in 2001, Jeuchter, Fisher and Alford discuss five characteristics of such a culture. They are:

- The organization works from a strategic focus.
- People in the organization have a clear sense of reality.
- People work from commitment rather than compliance.
- People's behavior is aligned throughout the organization.
- The organization demonstrates a self-renewing dynamic of accomplishment, learning and change

Leadership Strategies to Improve Understanding of Organizational Culture

Since organizational culture is so important for leaders, recognizing and acknowledging the culture is essential to leading an organization, and ultimately enabling it to change and progress. Therefore, in the school environment, the primary responsibility of leader in my opinion is also to understand the school culture and build an effective school culture. Bolman and Deal in their book *Shaping School Culture--The Heart of Leadership*, contend that "We believe the term culture provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their status." (p, 6)

Then let us look back at the school situation and consider one question -- what kind of strategies the school leaders should take in order to understand the school culture well? Upon reviewing relevant research, this writer would like to draw school leaders' attention to six aspects of culture (as follows):

1. **Honoring the past.** Strong leaders understand the importance of the stories, myths and lore of the school and how they have shaped the culture.
2. **Recognizing the heroes.** To succeed, it is essential to know who is important and why they are heroic
3. **Participating in the rituals.** Whether it is a welcome back event or retirement party, educational leaders are expected to be part of the practices that define school values.
4. **Understanding the rules and rewards.** Where rules stemmed from, how people are rewarded and for what they are rewarded are telling parts of the culture.
5. **Acknowledging the communications systems.** How, where and when people communicate are revealing aspects of a school culture.

6. **Recognizing the role of the physical environment.** The conditions under which people work help define the culture.

Through reviewing these, in their school, leaders can better evaluate what the shared values and beliefs are, and be able to move forward with the necessary relationships and knowledge to reshape the culture, if needed, and to continue the best aspects of the school.

Leadership Strategies to Build High-Trust and Effective School Cultures

In addition to improve the understanding of the school culture, another primary and important task for school leaders is to build a high-trust and effective school culture. Tschannen-Moran(2000) and Hoy (1999) present multiple studies that convincingly demonstrate how trusting relationships among teachers and principals contribute to a positive school climate, productive communication, increases in student learning, teachers collective sense of efficacy, and overall school culture effectiveness

For example, schools with high levels of trust between school professionals and parents, between teachers and the principal, and among teachers were three times more likely to improve in reading and mathematics than those schools with very low levels of trust. Schools with consistently low levels of trust showed little or no improvement in student achievement measures. As Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) pointed out, in situations in which teachers have high levels of trust for their principal, teachers exhibited greater levels of citizenship behavior during which they went "beyond the explicit requirements of the job" (p. 35). In addition, their continuous study in 2005 also found trusting climates were associated with significantly higher rates of student achievement even after controlling for such factors as poverty and race.

In summation, this writer believes that high-trust and effective school culture can be developed by leaders' focuses in terms of the following components:

Consistency. A concept prevalent in the definitions of trust in virtually all of the reviewed literature, consistency means that messages for different audiences (e.g., parents, staff members, students, and the community) have the same meaning. Predictability also reduces the level of perceived threat, and consistency can therefore lead to a sense of greater safety. That said, consistency is not in and of itself sufficient to generate trust.

Compassion. Care is essential in a trusting relationship. Vulnerability is inherent in interpersonal interaction-- if people fear that they will be exploited because of the relationship, they will not be likely to invest in it. Compassion in a relationship implies that there is protection and that one person will not do harm to the other person. This demonstration of concern applies not only to the individuals in the relationship but also to the extended web of relations, such as friends, family, and professional colleagues.

Compassion can be established by showing confidence in the abilities of others and recognizing their contributions. Leaders can implement such practices as creating flexible work schedules, allowing for personal time, offering employment stability, promoting social events, and having frequent contact with employees to show their concern for their well-being (Shaw, 1997). Simple courtesies (such as saying please and thank you) and offering forgiveness to others can demonstrate compassion and assist in building trust (Covey, 2004).

Communication. Soliciting feedback on personal and organizational performance builds trust by creating a sense of vulnerability and presupposing that this exposure will not be subjected to exploitation from others (Gimbel, 2003). Covey suggests that loyalty to the absent, clear expectations, necessary apologies, and legitimate feedback are activities that promote trust (Covey, 2004). Barlow (2001) uses the word openness to describe trusted leaders, focusing on how sharing of information signals a "confidence that the information will not be exploited" (p. 26). Tschannen-Moran (2000) also refers to openness as a strategy that "breeds trust while withholding behavior provokes suspicion and distrust" (p. 2).

Well-timed sharing of both positive and negative information is linked with developing trust, and individuals within organizations that are typified by a failure to openly communicate in a timely fashion tend to rely on rumors and an informal network to provide information (Shaw, 1997). Maintaining appropriate confidentiality such as protecting the privacy of student and employee discipline files also promotes trust (Fullan, 2003; Gimbel, 2003).

Competence. Consistently communicating goodwill is insufficient to develop trust in the absence of behaviors that match the statements. Competence, defined as the "execution of an individual's role responsibilities," is imperative (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 24). Displaying competence can be daunting, given the ever-changing context of schooling and the multiple aims that typify the education process. Nonetheless, teachers and principals are engaged in a mutually interdependent relationship and their reliance on one another is contingent upon how well they fulfill expectations (Barlow, 2001). Reputation, prizes, and affiliations are often outward representations of competence (Blomqvist & Stahle, 1998). In the context of accountability, producing results is often seen as the best determinant of competence (Shaw, 1997).

Each of these four factors—consistency, compassion, communication, and competence—is necessary in a trusting relationship but insufficient in isolation. The four factors together develop trust. Although it may sound like an oversimplification, the writer believes that developing trust is the most central duty for school leaders if they are interested in positively influencing their learning community and building effective school culture.

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