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What Makes a Good School Culture?

It starts with connections — strong and overlapping interactions among all members of the school community

BY:
Leah Shafer (/uk/author/leah-shafer/517481)

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Most principals have an instinctive awareness that organizational culture is a key element of school success. They might say their school has a “good culture” when teachers are expressing a shared vision and students are succeeding — or that they need to “work on school culture” when several teachers resign or student discipline rates rise.

But like many organizational leaders, principals may get stymied when they actually try to describe the elements that create a positive culture. It's tricky to define, and parsing its components can be challenging. Amid the push for tangible outcomes like higher test scores and graduation rates, it can be tempting to think that school culture is just too vague or “soft” to prioritize.

That would be a mistake, according to Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/ebony-bridwell-mitchell>), an expert in education leadership and management. As she explains, researchers who have studied culture have tracked and demonstrated a strong and significant correlation between organizational culture and an organization's performance. Once principals understand what constitutes culture — once they learn to see it not as a hazy mass of intangibles, but as something that can be pinpointed and designed — they can start to execute a cultural vision.

A culture will be strong or weak depending on the interactions between people in the organization. In a strong culture, there are many, overlapping, and cohesive interactions, so that knowledge about the organization's distinctive character — and what it takes to thrive in it — is widely spread.

At a recent session of the National Institute for Urban School Leaders (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/program/national-institute-urban-school-leaders>) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/>), Bridwell-Mitchell took a deep dive into “culture,” describing the building blocks of an organization's character and fundamentally how it feels to work there.

Culture Is Connections

A culture will be strong or weak depending on the interactions between the people in the organization, she said. **In a strong culture, there are many, overlapping, and cohesive interactions among all members of the organization.** As a result, knowledge about the organization's distinctive character — and what it takes to thrive in it — is widely spread and reinforced. **In a weak culture, sparse interactions make it difficult for people to learn the organization's culture,** so its character is barely noticeable and the commitment to it is scarce or sporadic.

- Beliefs, values, and actions will spread the farthest and be tightly reinforced when everyone is communicating with everyone else. In a strong school culture, leaders communicate directly with teachers, administrators, counselors, and families, who also all communicate directly with each other.
- A culture is weaker when communications are limited and there are fewer connections. For example, if certain teachers never hear directly from their principal, an administrator is continually excluded from communications, or any groups of staff members are operating in isolation from others, it will be difficult for messages about shared beliefs and commitments to spread.

Culture Is Core Beliefs and Behaviors

Within that weak or strong structure, what exactly people believe and how they act depends on the messages — both direct and indirect — that the leaders and others in the organization send. A good culture arises from messages that promote traits like collaboration, honesty, and hard work.

Culture is shaped by five interwoven elements, each of which principals have the power to influence:

1. **Fundamental beliefs and assumptions**, or the things that people at your school consider to be true. For example: “All students have the potential to succeed,” or “Teaching is a team sport.”
2. **Shared values**, or the judgments people at your school make about those belief and assumptions — whether they are right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust. For example: “It's wrong that some of our kindergarteners may not receive the same opportunity to graduate from a four-year college,” or “The right thing is for our teachers to be collaborating with colleagues every step of the way.”
3. **Norms**, or how members believe they *should* act and behave, or what they think is expected of them. For example: “We should talk often and early to parents of young students about what it will take for their children to attend college.” “We all should be present and engaged at our weekly grade-level meetings.”
4. **Patterns and behaviors**, or the way people *actually* act and behave in your school. For example: There are regularly-scheduled parent engagement nights around college; there is active participation at weekly team curriculum meetings. (But in a weak culture, these patterns and behaviors can be different than the norms.)
5. **Tangible evidence**, or the physical, visual, auditory, or other sensory signs that demonstrate the behaviors of the people in your school. For example: Prominently displayed posters showcasing the district's college enrollment, or a full parking lot an hour before school begins on the mornings when curriculum teams meet.

Each of these components influences and drives the others, forming a circle of reinforcing beliefs and actions, Bridwell-Mitchell says; strong connections among every member of the school community reinforce the circle at every point.