# Culture and School Performance

**Strong schools have strong cultures evidenced by their heroes and heroines, rituals and ceremonies, and shared beliefs and values.**



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We think schools can learn some lessons about productivity from the corporate world. The big message is not tight management and preoccupation with the bottom line. It's a more elusive, subtle way to approach performance.

The importance of culture is an old-fashioned idea that great business leaders have known for years (Deal and Kennedy, 1981). Many school principals also spend considerable time building cohesive school cultures. They might not label it as such, but it's precisely what they're doing. The wisdom of their efforts is supported by educational researchers who have documented the power of culture. Sarason (1971) demonstrated how school cultures can undermine innovation. When culture works against you, it's nearly impossible to get anything done. Rutter (1979) linked something called "ethos" to student achievement. Ethos, another term for culture, can produce dramatic results when it channels energy in positive directions. The problem is to make something powerful and ill-defined work for us and to show that building strong school cultures is intimately tied to improving educational performance.

### What Is Organizational Culture?

Pragmatically, culture is an informal understanding of the "way we do things around here" or "what keeps the herd moving roughly west." The elements of culture are shared values and beliefs, heroes and heroines, rituals and ceremonies, and an informal network of priests and priestesses, storytellers, spies, and gossips. A word or two about each.

*Shared values and beliefs* are the soul of culture. At IBM "our business is service" is a value that influences behavior from the corporate suite to the sales force or shop floor. Values and beliefs are forged from the experiences of visionary heroes like Tom Watson of IBM or Ray Kroc of McDonalds. Values are embodied, shaped, and revised by situational heroes such as the franchisee who invented the Egg McMuffin or the local McDonalds manager whose store is exemplary in quality, service, and convenience—values that have made McDonalds one of America's fastest growing and most profitable corporations.

*Rituals and ceremonies* provide tangible opportunities for values to be reinforced, heroes to be celebrated, and symbols to be displayed and exchanged. In Dallas each year, Mary Kay Cosmetics holds an annual seminar where Mary Kay Ash recognizes and anoints the women who exemplify the company's values of "dream big and do it." Diamond bumblebees are awarded reminding everyone that while it is aerodynamically impossible for bumblebees to fly, the little critters don't know it.

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The bumblebee symbolizes the "you can do it" spirit that has made Mary Kay one of the country's leading cosmetics firms.

Cultures are reinforced and transformed by the network priests and priestesses who worry about the values, storytellers whose stories carry the values and reinforce the heroes and heroines, and spies and gossips who remind everyone that organizations are human.

Leading companies in America have, through trial and error, built cohesive cultures that provide direction, motivation, and support in human institutions. Caterpillar, McDonalds, IBM, Procter and Gamble, Tandem, General Electric, Johnson and Johnson, 3M—different companies with one common characteristic: they have strong cultures of shared values, heroes and heroines, rituals and ceremonies, and a vibrant, informal network.

### Strong School Culture: A Pipedream?

There are two key reasons why strong school cultures can improve educational productivity. The first is internal: in many schools, teachers and students do not know what is expected of them nor do they understand how their actions are related to schoolwide efforts. Parents, teachers, students, administrators, and support staff often form subcultures around immediate, parochial interests that pull a school in several directions. Under such conditions it is not hard to see what happens to beliefs, standards, motivation, effort, consistency, and other ingredients essential to teaching or learning. Strong cultures provide the internal cohesion that makes it easier for teachers to teach; students to learn; and for parents, administrators, and others to contribute to the instructional process.

The second reason is external. For better or worse, schools are judged by appearance as much as by results. Internal squabbling, mixed signals, unfavorable stories, and the lack of tangible evidence that a school stands for something special make it difficult to secure the faith and support of external groups. Through shared values, heroes and heroines, rituals and ceremonies, and a supportive informal network, a school can communicate its identity to outside groups and get them involved.

### What Educational Leaders Can Do

First, get to know your culture. Every organization has one, but cultures are implicit and elusive. Coming to grips with values, heroes and heroines, and the informal network can provide an interesting map of a school culture and its strength and consistency. Ask parents, students, and teachers what the school really stands for. Solicit stories about the school or school-related events. Note how people spend their time and what they pay attention to. How much time do people spend in meetings and what is discussed? What do students do at recess and after school? What happens at PTA meetings and parent nights? Who are the heroes and heroines and what values do they represent? What kinds of metaphors are used frequently in everyday conversation? What does the school building "say" about the school? Who plays what role in the cultural network? What's posted on classroom walls or written on restroom walls? Mapping a culture can be an eye-opening experience.

Second, determine how the school culture might encourage or undermine educational performance. Cultures evolve through human interaction, values can shift, anti-heroes can emerge, rituals can become ho-hum habits, subcultures can jockey for supremacy, and the informal network can undermine rather than reinforce the culture. Communities sometimes change rapidly while school cultures stay the same, resulting in a mismatch between internal and external beliefs and values. Does each group think the school stands for something different? Are parents' values different from teachers' or students' values? Is there a thread of common values across teachers or classrooms? Do teachers and students spend time on instruction or jostling for control of the classroom? Are faculty heroes or heroines exemplary teachers or chronic complainers? Are stories about the school mostly positive or largely negative? Does the principal emphasize instruction while teachers pay most attention to discipline? Do student heroes or heroines provide multiple role models or are they mainly athletes, social stars, or troublemakers? Are faculty meetings lethargic or do they provide opportunities for important values to be discussed? Are the principal's style and behavior consistent with the values he or she talks about? Are everyday metaphors about growing and learning or about surviving and punching a time card? When was the last time parents and teachers worked for a common cause? Does the school building convey what is really going on inside? Cultural patterns that everyone wants can be strengthened, cultures that have become weak or inappropriate need to be revised.

Third, plan occasions where people can come to grips with values that need to be re-examined or changed.   ▪▪

### The Principal's Role

Effective principals are symbolic leaders who pay attention to small, but important, cultural details. Consider a few: Reflecting desired values in everyday speech and behavior. Anointing heroes and heroines among teachers, students, and parents who exemplify these values. Telling the story of the school's origins or about the person for whom the school was named. Setting aside time in faculty meetings to talk about values and philosophy. Taking the time to introduce a new teacher, student, or parent to the school's culture. Arranging a parents night so that values and heroes or heroines can be celebrated in style. Preparing a retirement party so that it reinforces values and beliefs embodied in an elder leaving the culture. Telling stories about a student whose reading improved dramatically and giving other storytellers an opportunity to relate such tales in public. Writing a personal note to a student who has done something special. Publicly recognizing a teacher who has gone out of her way to help a student. Organizing a day-long session where students, teachers, parents, and community residents can discuss the values and beliefs of the school.

Little things like these can, over time, transform a school culture. And a strong culture will yield dividends in learning achievement, morale, personal growth, and other indicators of school performance.□

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