EPISODE 5

Reading, Shaping, and re-Shaping School Culture

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The culture of an organization plays an essential role in improving performance. Positive culture can infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose (Deal & Peterson, 1999). A positive school culture is associated with more rapid and lasting school improvement, higher teacher motivation, greater teacher collaboration, more application of professional development skills, reduced absenteeism, and higher levels of student learning (Hofsteade, 2005; Fullan, 2007; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Since the concept of organizational culture is, well, a concept— It is common to underestimate its power and effect size. It is abstract. It is essentially invisible. As concepts go, it is a soft concept, not quantitative, measurable, and visible like a schedule or a budget.

Organizational culture is a paradox. It is invisible, yet omnipresent. It is a soft concept that yields hard- hitting effects. It is easy to miss, but impossible to avoid. Like viruses, gravity, and electrical fields, organizational culture's wispy appearance belies its formidable power. Culture is best examined by looking toward its effects, rather than directly at the culture itself.

Strong organizational cultures alter and align the behavior of people within the culture. A strong culture changes what we do–it alters our behavior. It similarly alters the behavior of others around us to produce a more uniform set of behaviors among the group-alignment.

Organizational culture is powerful and persistent in its ability to alter and align human behavior. Leaders, as they become more skillful at seeing and shaping culture, are in a position to not only understand and assess a culture, but also to participate in the culture and shape it from within. A leader's personal characteristics, then, become important culture shaping elements. It's hard to imagine, for example, a lethargic leader leading the charge to create a high-energy culture, or a secretive leader shaping a group's culture toward openness and transparency.

> **"***Where culture is strong, laws are unnecessary. Where culture is weak, laws are unenforceable.***"**
> **Stephen R. Covey**

Reading School Culture: Making the Invisible Visible

Since school culture has such a powerful influence on individual and group behavior, it is important to develop the ability to see it and assess the degree to which the culture is influencing behavior in the direction we desire. Organizational culture, being invisible, does not lend itself to direct observation and assessment. We can, however, gain insight by examining the effects and artifacts that any particular culture produces. In this way, school administrators are a bit like anthropologists, seeking to infer meaning from the evidence left in the wake of a school's culture. Admittedly, this sounds pretty theoretical. Let's examine some practical ways administrators can assess school culture by looking for that culture's effects and artifacts. These strategies are adapted from the sources listed in the introduction and particularly from *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (1982), by Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy, pages 129-135.

> **"***The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior that the leader is willing to tolerate.***"**
> **Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker**

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1. **Study the physical setting of the school.** The school's culture doesn't determine the actual physical layout or architectural style of a school. Culture effects can be seen, however, in the manner in which humans have altered the environment. Is the school tidy or messy? What is on the walls and display cases? How is student work displayed? Human beings alter their work environments in ways that provide accurate insights into the cultural forces at play. Administrators do well to learn to see and analyze these clues. It's difficult to change a culture without first seeing it.

2. **Interview newcomers.** New employees have a short window of opportunity to better see aspects of a school's culture. In a short time, the window will close as they become a part of the culture and lose their outsider/newcomer status.

This quote, from the Effective Schools pioneer, Dr. Lawrence Lezotte, offers a keen insight into the role of culture in school improvement.

"You cannot improve a school from the outside. And, you cannot improve a school from the inside. To improve a school, you must be an insider with the eyes of an outsider."

3. **Watch how the culture adapts to curve balls.** Unexpected happenings cause a culture, if only for a moment, to move from background to foreground. During this time an astute school leader can gain insights that are not visible at other times.

Shaping School Culture
Identifying the Elements of Organizational Culture

An element is a fundamental, irreducible building block. Ask any Chemistry teacher… if you want to understand a substance and how it behaves, you must determine the elements from which it is made. And, to change a substance, you must change and recombine the elements from which it is made.

What follows is a periodic table, of sorts, listing four elements that react and combine to shape and re-shape school culture.

> *Culture is what happens when the managers leave the room- doing what's right in the absence of authority.*
> **Vala Afshar**

| He 1 Heroes | Ri 2 Rituals | Ev 3 Events | Ce 4 Ceremonies |

Heroes
Every culture has certain members that the group holds up as exemplars, as possessing the "right stuff," or as being the best of the best. These people shape the school's culture mightily and are key players in the re-shaping of a school's culture.
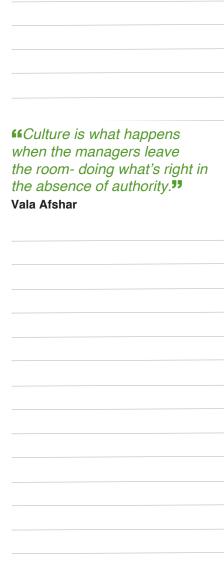
Rituals
Rituals are common, every-day, recurring happenings that mold culture slowly, over time, through repetition.

Events
School cultures are powerfully shaped by what happens at school. These happenings can be planned or unplanned. Culture is shaped by what we cause to happen and by how we respond to what happens outside our choosing.

Ceremonies
You can tell a lot about what is important to a school by looking at what it chooses to celebrate.

doodles and notes

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Additional Resources

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> "*Your company's culture is your operating system.*"
> **Dave Gray**

> "*Culture eats strategy for breakfast.*"
> **Peter Drucker**