

Practical Implementations for Creating a Positive School Culture

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Introduction: Building Prior Knowledge

People who are in the education profession for the right reasons chose to be an educator because they want to make an impact on students and make a difference in this world. If that is the case, then educators have a moral responsibility to do their best to uphold that desire in every decision they make. For an educational leader, this means making conscious and intentional choices that will create a positive school environment for our students. On a basic level, students must feel safe and have a sense of belonging before they can be motivated and be successful at school (Maslow, 1970). This proves that spending time working to create a school culture that provides safety and belonging is definitely worthwhile.

The discussion of this elusive “positive school culture” seems to be never-ending. Any educator would agree that school culture is important, and that the culture of a school can have a positive or negative impact on student achievement because “when a school exhibits characteristics of a positive school culture, there are fewer suspensions, increased attendance rates, and increased achievement on standardized test scores” (Ohlson, 2009). However, the phrase has become so overused that hardly anyone knows exactly what it means or how to achieve a positive one. It is discussed often, and some schools have achieved this positive culture naturally, but for schools currently existing with a toxic culture, it is crucial that steps are taken to change the tone or good teachers will leave and students will suffer.

What does the literature say?

There is much literature that provides different definitions of school culture and ideas of what it should look like. School culture, “a prerequisite of effective schools” (Karadag & Oztekin-Bayir, 2018), can be a broad term, “referring to the traditions, rituals, shared norms, and

assumptions of a school. These site-specific beliefs are adopted over time and provide a distinct character to the school (Zahed-Babelan, Koulaei, Moeinikia, & Rezaei Sharif, 2019). While it does take time to develop a school culture, it is also necessary that all the traditions and shared norms are “understood by members of the school community” (Ohlson, 2009). Otherwise, those values have not been truly acquired by all of the stakeholders and the culture will feel inauthentic.

An understanding of school culture is important, but educational leaders need specific actions that they can implement at their schools to enact this idealized objective. In order to create a positive school culture, the principal needs to create positivity in the school by building authentic relationships, creating a shared vision thus allowing for a collaborative environment, and exhibiting morality through his or her everyday actions.

Intentional Action Steps: Be Purposeful

To create a positive school culture or to change a negative one, it must first start with the principal. Ideally, when a teacher first decides he or she wants to become an educational administrator, there exists “an authentic desire to serve” (Spicer, 2016). This is because stepping up to the task of creating a school culture requires selfless dedication and can often feel thankless. This should not come as a surprise to any good teacher, but the selflessness is now on a larger, more public scale. The role of the principal has evolved in modern times from “agents of stability into leaders of change” which means today’s “principals need to work harder at articulating the basis of reform” (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019).

Principals are “the most important determinant of this formation” of school culture; they are the “symbols” of the school or “the models or agents that reflect [the culture] through their

characters” (Karadag & Oztekin-Bayir, 2018). These type of school leaders embody the culture they want to create by having the values exude through them in every decision they make.

Before a principal is able to decide what kind of culture is needed at a school, he or she “must first understand the school’s culture” (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019).

To be able to understand why a school’s culture may be considered toxic is helpful when trying to transform to a more positive attitude. It seems obvious, but “positive attitudes go a long way in developing and maintaining a positive culture” (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding why a toxic culture exists is especially important if a principal is at a school where negativity has spread so much and is so ingrained in the school that even teachers may be reluctant to change. One common reason this happens is because so many “new programs, new initiatives, and new goals are continually introduced and never given the support and resources necessary to impact teaching and learning. The end result is a culture that is reluctant to change in fear that this change will soon pass” (Ohlson, 2009).

Another reason is if the staff has felt neglected and their concerns about the safety of the building has been ignored because “deteriorating schools can have a negative impact on student and teacher morale. Students score much lower on standardized achievement tests if they are in a school that has not been maintained, and teachers are less satisfied with their jobs if the condition of their school is poor” (Spicer, 2016). If either of these reasons persist for a prolonged period of time, the damage can be detrimental to morale and take years to reverse.

A Catalyst for Change: BE the CHANGE

Even if it does take years to change a negative culture into a positive one, it is worth it. If the toxic environment persists, good teachers will leave because “teachers want to work in a

highly successful school,” and once that positive atmosphere has been formed, “teachers [will] begin to believe that their school is successful” (Spicer, 2016). If the good teachers leave or believe that their school is not successful, then it is the students that will suffer. If the culture of a school sends vibes of failure, then that is what will happen. This idea seems as if it is common sense, but unfortunately it has not been the common practice for many schools. There is nothing more important than the principal of a school ensuring that there is a positive culture because “staff and students need to be positive about their ability to set and achieve ambitious goals;” otherwise, it simply will not happen (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019).

The journey to transforming a school’s culture to positive one begins with building relationships: “the road to student achievement is paved when a school principal has a leadership style that... hosts an intentional focus on building positive relationships” (Spicer, 2016). As a teacher in a classroom, there are many opportunities to easily create relationships with students, but for a principal, this relationship-building does have to be intentional. It can be very easy to be swept up in the workload that comes with being an educational leader and not take the time to really get to know your staff members and students, but relationship-building should actually be prioritized and pushed to the top of the to-do list. A small thing like setting an intention to appear in classrooms every day can create a large impact on a school’s culture because “the mere presence of the school principal in a classroom may decrease the likelihood of behavioral issues” and make the teachers of those classrooms feel seen (Ohlson, 2009).

Another implementation to effectively build relationships is one that is so simple that it may seem obvious: stopping to make eye contact and speak with teachers and students around the school building. Making eye contact with someone is a base-level of human interaction: “eye contact conveys honesty and sincerity” and “is often an invitation to open communication”

(Phutela, 2015). This type of nonverbal communication is crucial in relationship building because “avoiding eye contact signals distrust, suspicion, or lack of interest” (Phutela, 2015). A principal should never make staff members or students feel as if they are bothering the principal by attempting to speak to them or asking a question. Although the principal may be on the way to deal with larger, important school matters, taking that extra moment to make a human being who is a part of the school feel respected or worthy can solidify a relationship that could in turn factor into the culture of the school and eventually reduce the number of important school matters that must be dealt with by the principal.

Relationships Are Always a Priority

The most crucial part of building a solid relationship with another person is honesty and transparency. Some leaders expect people to follow them simply because they are the leader and feel that they do not need to share their decision-making process, but “studies suggest that honesty is the quality most appreciated by subordinates.” To gain trust from teachers and students, principals should practice “stewardship, which is the willingness to accept accountability for results without always trying to impose control over others. In simplest terms, stewardship asks leaders to acknowledge their own human faults and limitations rather than hiding behind their status and power” (Lashway, 1996). If a principal is able to achieve this level of honesty with his or her staff, then the relationship piece of school culture will fall into place easily.

Once authentic relationships have been established within a school, which may take an extended period of time if they are truly authentic, then a vision can be shared which will lead to a collaborative environment. It is the “truly effective schools” who have a shared vision that

“clearly articulat[es] the school’s core values and provid[es] a standard by which actions will be judged” (Lashway, 1996).

However, the benefits of having a vision “lie not in catchy phrases, but in the process used to reach the point where such a phrase embodies the purpose, meaning, and vision of the school from the varying perspectives of all its different customers” (Spicer, 2016). This is why it is imperative to have a foundation of authentic relationships built first because this process of reaching a shared vision together is what can create a long-lasting positive school culture. If the positive relationships are not built first, then “people become fragmented,” and “classrooms often become isolated with no deeper bond to bring them together.” This will lead “people [to] then feel lost and become negative about their situation” (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019). A cute catchphrase on a poster at the front of the building will not erase those feelings. Instead, that slogan should “become the basis or foundation for all decision-making and the compass guiding the school community.” If the students are also in on this shared vision, and they feel as if their goals “are aligned with the teaching goals of the faculty, there may be a stronger desire to attend school” (Ohlson, 2009). There is a positive statement to be made about a school’s culture if students have a strong desire to attend school.

Collaboration is Key: Involve all Stakeholders

Another factor that is key in building a positive school culture is a collaborative environment which will almost automatically happen if authentic relationships and a shared vision exists. Collaborative environments “have been presented as the best setting for learning for both teachers and students,” and “school leaders that shape their cultures to become more collaborative should reap the benefits of greater teacher performance and satisfaction.” One way

for principals to allow for this collaboration to happen is to “consider providing teachers with frequent common planning and team time.” Common planning time is something teachers consistently ask for and doing so would create “an atmosphere of lifelong learning and trusting relationships” (Zahed-Babelan, et al., 2019).

After relationships, a shared vision, and a collaborative environment have been maintained, one last but important piece is left for the principal to bring into the school’s culture: morality. School leaders “have a special responsibility to exercise authority in an ethical way,” and “teachers must be convinced that the principal’s point of view reflects values they support” (Lashway, 1996). To be able to consider a school culture to be positive, it is necessary that the philosophy that is deeply ingrained in the school be ethical and representative of sound morals. After all, a school is responsible for educating the young generation. Achieving this “is not a matter of following a few simple rules.” This responsibility is “rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity” (Lashway, 1996), and it is accomplished through leading by example. All eyes are on the leader—the “principal’s conversations and actions are artifacts of her or his belief system: a leader’s core beliefs are exposed and expressed through the conversations and actions she/he does or does not engage in” (Sadlier, 2011), and the teachers and students will look to the principal when deciding how to think or act.

Having true, authentic relationships established allows a principal to be a moral leader. The school will not buy in to a culture that is being forced on them or that feels fake. The principal’s actions must align with what he or she says. This kind of “authentic leadership [has been] found to have a strong positive effect on school culture” because “school principals’ behaviors of self-awareness, transparency in relations... and internalized ethical viewpoint causes teachers to develop positive perceptions” (Karadag & Oztekin-Bayir, 2018). The desire

to create a positive school culture cannot be for self-serving reasons such as public appearance; it has to come from a desire to “to reach beyond narrow self-interest to achieve deeper learning, broader understanding, and higher goals” (Doscher & Normore, 2008). When we start to look beyond on ourselves and keep moral values at the forefront of our actions, that is when change in a school’s culture will happen.

Contribute or Combat

It is a sad fact that “schools too often serve as sites for racial, ethnic, gender, and religious stereotyping and slurs,” and it is the principal’s choices that can determine if his or her school’s culture will contribute to or combat that. These problems can be inevitable in a school, so the “tone that the principal sets and models makes a significant difference in determining the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of a school’s climate.” When faced with serious school culture issues, “principals must choose to confront and resolve” them rather than avoiding or ignoring them (Sadlier, 2011). A school that practices passivity and avoidance when confronted with ethical dilemmas is problematic. This approach of being “unwilling to discuss events and how they affect the world” stems from “a fear of offending others’ sensibilities.” Rather, moral leaders “are well prepared to confront and create the new normal” by discussing these events, such as bullying, school shootings, or teen suicide, objectively and diplomatically (Doscher & Normore, 2008). It is okay to show students that adults have to process these events and to model how to do that in a safe and healthy manner. Ultimately, this is one of the main goals in creating a positive school culture which will then lay the foundation for environment in which students can achieve academic success.

Conclusion

A school is not at its best if a positive school culture does not exist. It is the principal's job to identify and not ignore a toxic school culture because it will cause detriment over time and result in lower student achievement. The principal's job is to then be the change agent in the school and set the positive tone through his or her actions. There are specific steps that can be taken to achieve this. One is building relationships with teachers, staff, and students by being present in the school, taking the time to have conversations with undivided attention and eye contact, and being honest and transparent. Another step is to share a vision with all stakeholders so everyone is working toward the same goal, and with this, a more collaborative environment will be possible. One more crucial step in creating a positive school culture is being a moral leader with ethical values. Even in the face of adversity, it is important to keep strong values at the forefront if a principal wants a positive culture to endure. A moral educational leader should know that often his or her "actions constitute a drop in the bucket toward solving problems (Doscher & Normore, 2008)," but a principal who is leading his or her school positively will continue to press on because of an internal moral compass and desire to always do what is best for kids.

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