

Kent D. Peterson | Terrence E. Deal

THE
SHAPING
SCHOOL
CULTURE
FIELDBOOK

SECOND EDITION

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The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook

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Kent D. Peterson
Terrence E. Deal

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The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook



Introduction and Organization of the Fieldbook

This guide is designed to help you reflect on and hone leadership skills as you shape a better learning environment at your school where every child can learn. It may legitimate some of what you already know and are doing or add new possibilities. It also provides activities to develop cultural leadership, and it deepens and concretizes the concept of school culture by connecting it to the success of schools and students.

When gathering cases for our second edition of *Shaping School Culture*, we sought the best examples of a wide variety of cultural patterns and ways. These examples of what is possible piqued the curiosity of others. Over the past few years, interested leaders have asked us to help them learn how to read, appraise, and shape the culture of their school or district. Facing greater accountability, new curricular standards, and an expanded use of data in decision making, school leaders have often tightened structures. But the best leaders never forgot the central importance of their school's culture. Drawing on approaches we have used with thousands of principals, as well as new ideas from the leadership literature, we have distilled concrete ways to approach cultural analysis, review, and reinforcement. In this new edition, we have added more case examples, deepened the descriptions of the elements of culture, and expanded the set of strategies

leaders can use to nurture positive and transform toxic cultures. We have redesigned many of the activities and added new ones to enhance the repertoire of leaders. We have written a completely new chapter on the important topic of people and relationships, the informal network in schools. This chapter describes the positive and negative roles staff take on and how to work with them. This new chapter offers strategies for making the informal network a productive element of the school's culture.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This guide combines both active and reflective approaches for those who wish to invigorate their school's professional community, build trust and commitment, and return the heart and spirit to our schools. Underlying the chapters are three key processes for shaping cultural ways and traditions.

Leaders must

- Read cultural clues
- Review existing patterns and ways
- Reinforce or transform the culture

Initially, it is critical that leaders read existing cultural practices and ways to understand the key features of the culture. They need to revisit roots—the history of their district or school—and reconsider core features of the present. During this process, the leader is interpreting and intuitively identifying familiar ways that are positive as well as traditional baggage that is negative, depressing, or draining.

Second, leaders need to hold up existing customs against other possibilities. They need to identify positive, supportive norms, values, rituals, and traditions to understand the meaning of stories and to know the import of symbols. But they should also pinpoint cultural aspects that may be negative, harmful, or toxic. What positive things need more reinforcement? What time-honored but worn-out practices may need to be jettisoned?

Finally, leaders must work in a variety of ways to reinforce cultural patterns or else transform them. Even the best ways of life and meaningful rituals of a district or school need constant attention. In addition, moribund or negative features may need to be transformed, changed, or even shed. Both nurturance and change are part of cultural leadership.

THE FIELDBOOK'S ORGANIZERS: DISCUSSIONS, EXAMPLES, ACTIVITIES, AND CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

This book provides a wide variety of sources of information, inspiration, and suggestions. It can be read and used in a multitude of ways, either as a whole or in part. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the features of culture and the roles of symbolic leaders. These discussions are often followed by a set of illustrative examples.

Next, the book provides specific activities for individuals or teams that we call "Activities." Some are specifically designed as group activities, with suggestions for how to organize the session. Others are meant to stimulate reflection; in that case, the questions can become topics for dialogue or group brainstorming. These approaches have been tested and used with hundreds of educators.

Interspersed throughout the book are additional questions that we have titled "Crucial Questions," which provide the reader with ideas of interest to consider or to discuss with staff. These questions are useful for leaders to consider, but can also become the guiding topics for a staff discussion. Sometimes there are further suggestions for activities, reflections, and planning.



PART ONE

Interpreting School Culture

The Importance of Culture

A great deal of attention has been paid to making schools better. Policymakers want to get schools to change quickly and be more responsive to state mandates. The favored response has been to tighten up structures, standardize the curriculum, test student performance, and make schools accountable. In the short term, these solutions may pressure schools to change some practices and temporarily raise test scores. In the long term, such structural demands can never rival the power of cultural expectations, motivations, and values.

At a deeper level, all organizations, including schools, improve performance by fostering a shared system of norms, folkways, values, and traditions. These infuse an enterprise with passion, purpose, and a sense of spirit. Without a strong, positive culture, schools flounder and die. The culture of a school or district plays a central role in exemplary performance.

It is the same in any other setting. Whether it is a Starbucks coffee bar, a Southwest flight, or a Nordstrom department store, people function best when they passionately hold to a shared set of key values, central norms, and meaningful traditions.

The key to successful school performance is heart and spirit infused into relationships among people, their efforts to serve all students, and a shared sense of responsibility for learning. Without heart and spirit nourished by cultural ways,

schools become learning factories devoid of soul and passion, dead cultures without spirit.

Strong, positive school cultures do not just happen. They are built over time by those who work in and attend the school and by the formal and informal leaders who encourage and reinforce values and traditions. Many schools limp along with a weak or unfocused culture due to a paucity of leadership and a lack of concern. But there are just as many other schools that are flourishing because of a strong, passionate culture. These are supported and nourished by teacher leaders and school principals who consciously or unconsciously reinforce the best that the school and its staff can become. Schools with unfocused cultures are barely surviving, whereas schools with strong, positive cultures are rich in purpose and abundant in tradition and meaning.

The central concern of this book is the development of meaningful and productive schools. Leaders must shape and nourish a culture in which every teacher can make a difference and every child can learn and in which there are passion for and commitment to designing and promoting the absolute best that is possible.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CULTURE?

The notion of school culture is far from new. In 1932, educational sociologist Willard Waller (1932) argued that every school has a culture of its own, with a set of rituals and folkways and a moral code that shapes behavior and relationships. Parents and students have always detected the special, hard-to-pinpoint esprit of schools.

Students who have attended several schools can pick up the culture immediately as they work to become part of the mix. When they enter a new school, they know that things are different in a positive or negative way that encompasses more than just rules or procedures.

Staff members who walk into a new school also pick up the culture immediately. They consciously or intuitively begin to interpret unwritten rules, unstated expectations, and underground folkways. Within the first hour of a new assignment, teachers begin to sift through the deep silt of expectations, norms, and rituals to learn what it means to become an accepted member of the school.

The culture is also embedded in an informal cultural network. Staff members often take on roles in that network. Almost every school has its collection of keepers of the values who socialize new hires, gossips who transmit information,

storytellers who keep history and lore alive, and heroines or heroes who act as exemplars of core values. In contrast, in toxic cultures, one often finds “keepers of the nightmare” who perpetuate everything that has gone awry, rumor mongers who share only hostile gossip, negative storytellers who pass on pessimistic history, anti-heroines or anti-heroes who are harmful exemplars, and others who destroy positive energy and accomplishments (Deal and Peterson, 2009).

For many educators, the terms *climate* and *ethos* represent the organizational phenomena that we have described. *Climate* emphasizes the feeling and current tone of the school, the emotional content of the relationships, and the morale of the place. *Ethos* suggests shared folkways and traits, but misses the importance of ritual and ceremony.

We believe that the term *culture* encompasses the complex elements of values, traditions, language, and purpose somewhat better; therefore, we will use *culture* throughout this book. Culture exists in the deeper elements of a school: the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the special language and phrasing that staff and students use, and the expectations about change and learning that saturate the school’s world.

WHERE DOES CULTURE COME FROM?

Beneath the surface of everyday life in schools is an underground river of feelings, folkways, norms, and values that influence how people go about their daily work. This taken-for-granted set of expectations affects how people think, feel, and act. It shapes how they interpret the hundreds of daily interactions of their work lives and provides meaning and purpose for their interactions, activities, and work (Deal and Peterson, 2009).

Where does this aspect of schools come from? Over time, all schools develop a unique personality that is built up as people solve problems, cope with tragedies, and celebrate successes (Schein, 1985). This personality, or culture, is manifested in people’s patterns of behavior, mental maps, and social norms. A simple way of thinking about culture is “the way we do things around here” (Bower, 1966).

WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT?

The unwritten tablet of social expectations found in a culture influences almost everything that happens. The culture influences and shapes the ways that teachers,

students, and administrators think, feel, and act. For example, the following are aspects of the social expectations and values of the staff in a school:

- Whether they think improvement is important
- Whether they work collaboratively or in silos
- How much trust there is among staff members and with administrators
- Whether they feel a schoolwide responsibility for student learning
- How motivated they are to work hard
- How they feel when students do not perform well
- How they act in hallways, in lounges, and at faculty meetings
- How they dress for different occasions
- What they talk about in public or in private
- The degree of support they give to innovative colleagues
- Whom they go to for ideas or help
- How they feel about students and colleagues who are different from themselves
- Whether they believe that all students can learn
- Whether they assume that students' capacity is determined by their backgrounds
- The degree to which student learning depends solely on teaching the state-mandated curriculum.
- Whether they believe collaboration and teamwork are a good thing
- Whether they believe the state standards are potentially useful
- Whether they use data on student learning in daily planning
- Whether they see their daily work as a calling or a job

Every aspect of a school is shaped, formed, and molded by underlying symbolic elements. Although not all cultural aspects are easily shaped by leaders, over time, leadership can have a powerful influence on emerging cultural patterns. Being reflective can help leaders begin the process of reinforcing cultural patterns that are positive and transforming those that are negative or toxic.

Culture is a powerful web of rituals and traditions, norms and values that affects every corner of school life. School culture influences what people pay

attention to (focus), how they identify with the school (commitment), how hard they work (motivation), and the degree to which they achieve their goals (productivity) (Deal and Peterson, 1999).

A school's culture *sharpens the focus* of daily behavior and increases attention to what is important and valued. If the underlying norms and values reinforce learning, the school will focus on that. For example, in an elementary school in the Midwest, the value was to serve the academic needs of all students. The school thus focused time, energy, and resources on curriculum and instructional strategies that helped all students become readers by the third grade. If the culture supports student learning, student learning will drive people's attention. Culture sharpens focus.

A school's culture *builds commitment to and identification with core values*. For example, in one school, staff felt they were members of a professional community, and even when they were offered higher salaries and new opportunities elsewhere, they refused to leave. If the rituals and traditions, ceremonies and celebrations build a sense of community, the staff, students, and community will identify with the school and feel committed to the purposes and relationships there. A positive culture builds commitment.

A positive school culture *amplifies motivation*. When a school recognizes accomplishments, values effort, and supports commitment, staff and students alike will feel more motivated to work hard, innovate, and support change. In one school with an unclear sense of purpose, a lack of an inspiring vision, and few celebrations of accomplishment, staff showed little energy during planning sessions. This was not the case in a Louisiana school in which staff members visited one another's classrooms regularly, shared materials and curriculum ideas, celebrated one another's new ideas and accomplishments, and even developed a regional conference on innovative teaching practices. They were motivated not because it was in their job description or contract but because they wanted to be. A positive culture amplifies motivation.

Finally, a positive school culture *improves school effectiveness and productivity*. Teachers and students are more likely to succeed in a culture that fosters hard work, commitment to valued ends, attention to problem solving, and a focus on learning for all students. In schools with negative or despondent cultures, staff have either fragmented purposes or none at all, feel no sense of commitment to the mission of the school, and have little motivation to improve. In many schools with a strong professional culture, the staff share strong norms of collegiality and improvement, value student learning over personal ease, and assume all children can learn if

they—teachers and staff—find the curriculum and instructional strategies that work. In these schools, the culture reinforces collaborative problem solving, planning, and data-driven decision making. Positive, professional cultures foster productivity.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF CULTURE?

Culture comprises deep elements that are difficult to identify, such as norms and values, as well as more visible features, such as rituals and ceremonies. In this book, we will be closely examining all the key features of school culture.

Core Elements of Culture Addressed in This Book

- A shared sense of purpose and vision
- Norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions
- Rituals, traditions, and ceremonies
- History and stories
- People and relationships
- Architecture, artifacts, and symbols

We describe these features of culture, provide group activities for understanding them within a specific culture, illustrate them with examples from actual schools, and offer reflective questions that individuals or groups of school staff members and leaders can ponder.

CAN CULTURE BE SHAPED BY LEADERSHIP?

A key question in this book is “Can culture be shaped by leadership, or is it so amorphous and unalterable that it has a life of its own?”

Although school culture is deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of staff, students, and parents, it can be shaped by the work of leaders. As this book demonstrates, one of the key tasks of leaders is shaping culture (Schein, 1985, 2004) through myriad daily interactions, careful reflection, and conscious efforts.

The activities in this fieldbook have been used by principals and their faculties to understand existing cultural patterns and how these can be shaped or altered. Of course, this book is not a panacea. Members of a school must rely on shared values to shape culture in directions that are important, valuable, and meaningful for their school.



Vision and Values

The Bedrock of Culture

Many schools or districts have a set of values that solidly anchor daily activities with a deeper purpose. People know what is important even if they find it difficult to articulate. Deeper values and purposes shape a school's *vision*—its picture of a hoped-for future, its dream of what it can become. Such obscure and, often, veiled dreams provide a deep and rich sense of purpose and direction despite an uncertain future. This mythic side of schools is the “existential anchor” and “spiritual source” for a school's traditions, hopes, and fears (Deal and Peterson, 2009).

MISSION AND PURPOSE

At the center of a school's culture are the values that drive long-term planning, resource allocation, and daily work. Many schools have written mission statements to highlight what they are about, but their deeper purposes may be more complex and decidedly more inspirational. Core purposes hidden deep in the cultural fabric provide motivation to teachers, energize leaders to move forward, propel children to learn, and encourage parents and the community to get involved and give their support.

Trying to uncover a school's authentic mission and purpose may be more difficult than reading a mission statement. Often, it requires reading the actions and attitudes of staff and parents, probing plans and daily decisions of students, or