Leading to Change / How Do You Change School Culture?

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Consider the following laments that I have heard recently from school leaders: "We can't change the grading policy—it's part of our culture." "Public displays of data won't work here—the culture won't allow it." "The parents just don't understand—you can't change the culture by passing a law." Each of these statements includes the word *culture*, but the meaning of the term ranges from policies and procedures to personal preferences to deeply embedded belief systems.

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Cultural change, although challenging and time-consuming, is not only possible but necessary—especially in organizations in which stakeholders use the word "culture" as a rhetorical talisman to block leadership initiatives, stifle innovation, and maintain the status quo. In the last decade, the education standards movement has taught us that policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration.

How do you change the culture of schools? When it comes to lasting cultural change, four essentials are consistent across many leadership contexts.

First, *define what you will not change*. Identify specific values, traditions, and relationships that you will preserve. Rather than make every change a battle that exhausts political capital and diminishes trust, effective leaders place change in the context of stability. They take care not to convey the message, "Everything you have been doing in the past was ineffective, and your experience and professional judgment are irrelevant." A more thoughtful message is, "I am only going to ask you to engage in changes that will have meaning and value for you and every stakeholder we serve." For example, many schools have cherished traditions of excellence in athletics, music, or art—traditions that can be threatened when the leader says that academic achievement must be the top priority. Effective change leaders identify and build on traditions rather than compete with them. The trophy case bursting with evidence of athletic championships can share space with exceptional student artwork, outstanding science projects, and superb essays.

Second, *recognize the importance of actions*. Speeches and announcements are not enough. To lead challenging reform efforts, you must be willing to make personal changes in decision-making policies (Who has the authority to decide what?); personal time allocation (Which

meeting invitations do you accept and which do you decline?); and collegial relationships (Do you make time to listen to the personal stories of your colleagues?).

The greatest impediment to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what they actually do. Staff members are not seduced by a leader's claim of "collaborative culture" when every meeting is a series of lectures, announcements, and warnings. Claims about a "culture of high expectations" are undermined when school policies encourage good grades for poor student work. The "culture of respect" is undermined by every imperious, demanding, or angry e-mail and voice mail coming from the principal. Leaders speak most clearly with their actions. When staff members hear the call for transformation from a leader whose personal actions remain unchanged, their hope turns to cynicism.

Third, *use the right change tools for your school or district*. Christensen, Marx, and Stevenson (2006) differentiate *culture tools*, such as rituals and traditions; *power tools*, such as threats and coercion; *management tools*, such as training, procedures, and measurement systems; and *leadership tools*, such as role modeling and vision. Leaders must choose the appropriate change tools on the basis of a combination of factors, including the extent to which staff members agree on what they want and how to get there. Leaders who approach reform determined to apply a particular change method are making the mistake of the person holding a hammer who therefore sees only nails.

Fourth, *be willing to do the "scut work."* In *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, Tracy Kidder (2004) describes a renowned infectious disease specialist and leader in international health care. Farmer has revolutionized the beliefs and practices of stakeholders ranging from the poorest rural villagers in Haiti to the faculty of Harvard Medical School to policymakers at the United Nations. Combining his extensive field experience with sophisticated research and medical analyses, Farmer has upended traditional notions of health care. What does Farmer cite as one of his secrets? The willingness to do "unglamorous scut work."

Although education leaders must make speeches and attend board meetings, leaders aspiring to change school cultures will take the risk, as Superintendent Stan Scheer of Murrieta Valley Unified School District in California has done, of taking a turn as a substitute teacher or spending time with bus drivers at 5:00 on a frosty morning. When the school leader puts down the briefcase and picks up a stack of trays in the cafeteria or a pile of writing portfolios for personal review, then everyone knows that the leader takes every job in the school seriously. If you believe that every job has value and there is no such thing as unimportant work in schools, then demonstrate that belief through your actions.

Meaningful school improvement begins with cultural change—and cultural change begins with the school leader.

References

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