

Establishing and maintaining an effective school culture

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Context

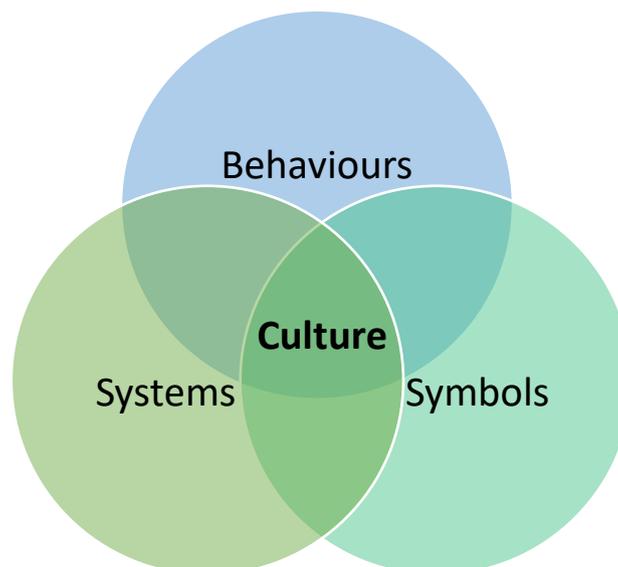
The word, culture, generally has two contexts. One is the artistic and intellectual expressions of a society in general and the other is the operational manifestations of a clearly defined group or workplace within that society. The context for culture in this article is the school workplace.

Workplace culture

Workplace culture strongly influences the ability of a school to achieve its mission and vision. A dysfunctional culture typifies a dysfunctional school and vice versa. Because it is a prime responsibility of school leaders to lead the determination and execution of the school mission and vision, it also becomes their responsibility to establish and maintain a highly functioning workplace culture.

The manifestations of workplace culture

Carolyn Taylor's book *Walking the Talk* (Random House, 2005) explains workplace culture in terms of three useful manifestations; behaviours, systems and symbols. Useful because they can be listed, described, included in school-based policies, and audited for continuing effectiveness. Because the manifestations are the useful aspect of culture, there is no need to agonise over trying to define what a workplace culture is.



Behaviours

These are the observable behaviours of everyone in the school. They can be observed as collective behaviours, common to many (typical), or individual behaviours that are tolerated or accepted by the majority. If unacceptable behaviour is tolerated by school leaders, it sets the baseline standard for the school's culture. It is most important, then, that unacceptable behaviour is defined, clearly communicated, and dealt with in a prompt, consistent and fair manner by school leaders.

The biggest influence on a school's culture is the behaviour of its leaders. Explicitly describing, demonstrating and modelling expected behaviours helps leaders to gain the trust of others and achieve high workplace efficacy. Those expected behaviours are strongly underpinned by a set of beliefs and it is by consultation and consensus that an agreed set of beliefs is identified and expressed through workplace policies, systems and symbols. Without agreement, compliance with cultural expectations is at risk of being low or non-existent.

Systems

Systems determine how to implement school policies. They relate to learning, human resources, material resources, the school environment, and the administration of the school's programs. Which systems are in place, their relevance to the mission and vision of the school, and how well they are implemented, all indicate the functionality of the school culture.

In particular, systems relating to human resources, both employees and students, have a strong effect on culture. For example; a school that lacks an agreed bullying and harassment policy is at high risk of unacceptable behaviours affecting its culture.

Symbols

The visual impressions of a school strongly indicate how functional its culture is. Such aspects as the signage, cleanliness and maintenance of the buildings and grounds communicate the degree of safety and care that permeates the school. How people dress and present themselves indicates their attitudes to work, including their beliefs about relationships and how students learn. The physical presentation of the learning spaces, such as displays, furniture and other resources, indicates the school's approaches to student learning and how effective that learning is. The prevalence of relaxed demeanours and smiling faces indicates how happy people are in the workplace.

Understanding the importance of symbols, and being explicit about what they should be, strongly helps to establish and maintain a culture of high efficacy. Visual symbolism can be expressed in school policies and codes; such as an assets replacement policy, an occupational health & safety policy, and a dress code.

Often referred to as the hidden curriculum, it is the behaviour of adults and the systems and symbols in a school that strongly influence the attitudes and behaviours of students, especially their attitudes to learning and their care of each other.

The components of school workplace culture

The components of a school workplace culture can be classified under the following closely-related and intersecting headings.

1. Efficacy and development
2. Morale; which can be further refined as being
 - a. A sense of achievement
 - b. A sense of influence
 - c. A sense of affiliation
3. Trust and safety (psychological & physical)

A table of such components can be used as a checklist, allowing the school to periodically audit its cultural health and the following checklist is an example. It is not exhaustive and can be adjusted or added to according to preference. Note that some of the components could be assigned to all three manifestations of culture but have been subjectively placed in the column deemed most appropriate.

Most of the components apply to the adults in the school, especially the senior leadership team members. However, many also relate to the students and broader community.

School culture checklist (example)

Classification	No.	Component	Behaviours	Systems	Symbols	Check	
Efficacy & development	1	Competence		Job descriptions			
	2			Agreed mission & vision			
	3		High expectations				
	4		Solving complex problems				
	5		Optimal use of adult expertise				
	6		Agreed beliefs about student learning				
	7			Agreed school-based policies & procedures			
	8			Negotiated & agreed budgets			
	9			Merit-based hiring			
	10			Strategic targeted resourcing			
	11					Appropriate learning environment	
	12					Adequate resources	
	13					Students on task	
	14					Shared calendar	
	15				Scheduled shared planning times		
	16					Meetings	
	17			Student-centered leadership			
	18			Leading & participating in teacher learning			
	19			The Principal as the lead learner			
	20					Observed activity	
	21					Learning walks	
	22	Knowledge			Qualifications		
	23				Displayed agreed mission & vision		
	24				Professional development		
	25					Handbooks	

Classification	No.	Component	Behaviours	Systems	Symbols	Check
Efficacy & development (cont'd)	26	Knowledge (cont'd)			Professional library	
	27		Transparency			
	28			Daily bulletins		
	29				Posted schedules	
	30			Project goals, guidelines & expectations		
	31	A growth mindset		Coaching & mentoring		
	32		Sharing			
	33		Valuing innovation			
	34		Creativity			
	35		Flexibility			
	36			Personal feedback system		
	37			Communities of practice		
	38			Personal appraisal		
	39			PLC's		
	40			Systematic program review		
Morale	1	Achievement	Acknowledgement			
	2		Celebration			
	3			Assigning responsibility		
	4			Support		
	5			Professional networks		
	6	Influence	Consulting			
	7		Whole community input			
	8				Parent helpers	
	9			Shared/distributed leadership		
	10			Team membership		
	11			Shared meeting agendas & minutes		
	12				Professional conversations	
	13			Opinion surveys		
	14			Interviews		
	15			Information sharing		
	16			Consensus		
	17	Affiliation	Collaboration			
	18		Courtesy			
	19		Respect			

Classification	No.	Component	Behaviours	Systems	Symbols	Check	
Morale (cont'd)	20	Affiliation (cont'd)	Classroom visits				
	21				Agreed belief statements		
	22					Teamwork	
	23		Engagement				
	24		Approachability				
	25		Availability				
	26					Staff lounge	
	27		Reflective listening				
	28		Inclusivity				
	29					Aesthetics	
30			Workload equity				
Trust & safety	1	Psychological safety	Genuine care				
	2			Bullying & harassment policy & procedures			
	3			Behaviour management procedures			
	4		Reliability				
	5			Code of ethics			
	6		Consistency				
	7			Code of behaviour			
	8		Active listening				
	9		Confidentiality				
	10			Dress code			
	11					Dress & demeanour	
	12			Transparency			
	13			Communication			
	14					Signage	
	15		Personal integrity				
	16					Resource relevance & maintenance	
	17	Physical safety		Safety audits			
	18			Student supervision			
	19					Safety compliant resources	
	20			Emergency procedures			
	21					Disabled access	
	22					Cleanliness	

What next?

Without action, these components of workplace culture are just words on paper and they cannot be mandated. To achieve compliance, they must be owned by the whole school community, deliberately explored over time and explicitly described as common understandings. These agreed understandings then need to be enshrined in school-based policies and procedures.

They must also be modelled by school leaders and normalised as standard practice throughout the school community. Non-compliance needs to be challenged, discussed and resolved by leaders.

The challenging aspect of this is how. How does a school community articulate its expectations and set its standards of workplace culture? One approach that helps to address this challenge is to take the following steps.

Determine standards

1. Form a small task force to
 - a. Advertise its mission of spear-heading a school workplace culture review
 - b. Establish any need for cultural improvement by
 - I. Seeking comprehensive input through surveys, meetings and interviews
 - II. Collating and categorising the data
 - III. Publishing the findings
 - IV. Determining the components of workplace culture that are indicated by the data
2. Survey the whole school community to gather beliefs, values and/or expectations about the three manifestations of workplace culture for each of the determined components
3. Collate and distil the survey results under each component
4. Publish the survey results
5. Determine which classification the components belong to (Efficacy & development; Morale; Trust & safety) and create a table similar to the checklist example above
6. Use the surveyed beliefs, values and/or expectations to develop the components that fall in the Systems column into draft school-based policies, taking care to incorporate relevant Behaviours and Symbols (see the appendix example)
7. Publish the draft policies and seek feedback for refinement
8. Refine the draft policies accordingly and present them to the school's governing body for scrutiny and ratification
9. Publish the ratified policies as official documents

Create procedures

1. With the leadership team, draft procedures that support the implementation of each ratified policy
2. Publish the drafts to all school-based employees and seek feedback for refinement
3. In the light of the feedback, finalise and publish the procedures as official documents

Note: Usually, school-based procedures do not need to be ratified by the governing body

Systematically review

1. Each year or sooner if indicated by need, survey the continuing relevance and effectiveness of each policy and its accompanying procedures. It may be expedient to adapt and use the culture checklist for this purpose.
2. Form small review teams to examine and update those policies and procedures indicated by the survey as being in need of review

3. Present the reviewed documents to the leadership team for scrutiny and refinement
4. Present the resulting reviewed policies to the governing body for ratification
5. Publish the freshly ratified policies and reviewed procedures as official documents

Appendices

Policy example

Student bullying and/or harassment policy

Beliefs

1. The bullying and/or harassment of students has a negative effect on the educational environment of the school. Students who are bullied, intimidated or fearful of other students cannot take full advantage of the educational opportunities.
2. Bullying and/or harassment is an uninvited verbal, written or physical conduct directed at a student by another student(s) that has the intent and effect of:
 - a. Physically harming a student (e.g., hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, and invading one's personal space in an aggressive manner)
 - b. Damaging, extorting or taking a student's personal property
 - c. Placing a student in reasonable fear of physical harm
 - d. Placing a student in emotional unrest by spreading rumours, manipulating social relationships or environment, engaging in social exclusion, extortion, intimidation, and ridicule
 - e. Discriminating against or marginalizing because of ethnicity, colour, disability, gender or sexual preference
 - f. Cyber-bullying: forms of verbal and psychological bullying that occur on the Internet through such social networking applications as e-mail, instant messaging, or personal profile web sites (such as Instagram)
 - g. Creating an intimidating or hostile environment that substantially interferes with a student's educational opportunities
 - h. Creating verbal statements or written remarks that are taunting, malicious, threatening or sexual

Standards

1. Bullying and/or harassment of a student by another student is strictly prohibited on school property, on school buses, and at school-sponsored events and/or activities, whether occurring on or off campus.
2. The school will conduct an annual bullying and/or harassment education program to provide definitions, inform students of their associated rights and responsibilities, and inform students of the consequences of bullying and/or harassing other students.
3. The school will conduct an annual bullying and harassment survey to determine the extent of such abuse and any necessary intervention and/or support actions that need to be instigated.

Guidelines

1. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Community Relations Global policy, Code of Conduct, Code of Ethics (Teachers), Student Rights, Responsibilities and Expectations policy, Student Morale policy and relevant School Board policies.
2. Consequences for students who are found to have bullied others may include counselling, parent conference, detention, suspension, expulsion, and/or exclusion from school-sponsored activities.
3. Depending upon the severity of a particular situation, the Director may also take appropriate steps to ensure students' safety. Such steps may include separating and supervising the students involved, reporting incidents to law enforcement bodies, if appropriate, and the implementation of a safety plan and/or supervision plan with parents.

Procedure example

Bullying survey

We value your opinion about how safe our school is and we are now seeking your honest opinion about bullying at school.

Please finish writing the next sentence. A bully is a person who _____

Please think about these questions and answer them truthfully.

- | | | |
|--|-----|--------------------------|
| Have you ever been bullied at our school? | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Have others ever been bullied at our school? | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you answered 'Yes', please answer these other questions. You can tick more than one box.

- | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| What is your sex? | Female | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Male | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| When did this happen? | Today | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Yesterday | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Last Week | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Last month | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Early this year | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Last year | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Where did this happen? | In class | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | In the building | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | In the playground | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Outside the gate | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | In the school bus | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | On the way to school | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | On the way home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | Internet/Web | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Telephone or Handphone | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

If it happened in the building or playground, please explain where. _____

If you were bullied, please answer these other questions.

What happened?	Left out of games	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Bad looks	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Bad words	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Called names	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Bad notes or letters	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Graffiti	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Threats	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Demands	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Things damaged or taken	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Pushed around	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Hit	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know why this happened?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was it because of any of these things?	Your looks	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your size	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your clothes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your colour	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your religion	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your gender	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Your family	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Where you live	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Things you like or don't like	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Was the bully the same sex as you are?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
What did you do after it happened?	Just felt bad	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Told a teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Told a parent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Bullied back	<input type="checkbox"/>

Stayed away from school

Avoided the bully

If you told a teacher, did they help? Yes

No

Would you like to talk to someone about it? Yes

No

If you would like to talk to someone about being bullied, please give us your name.

My name: _____

Who would you like to talk to? _____

If you would like to name any bullies at our school, please go ahead.

Names of bullies: _____

Thank you for helping us with this survey.