



Addressing Toxic Cultures: Building Positive Relationships in Depressed Environments

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Culture is a Powerful Force

**School culture influences
how people think, feel, and act.**

**Culture is a key determinant of staff
focus, commitment, motivation, and
productivity.**


The Role of School Culture

“Culture is the most powerful source of leverage for bringing about change in school – or any organization for that matter.”

- Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement*, 1992.

“Probably the most important and difficult job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school... A school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principals, teachers and parents can ever have.”

- Roland Barth, reflecting upon the power of a school’s culture to shape professional learning and student achievement in *Educational Leadership*, May 2002 (ASCD).



Culture is a powerful force that exists in any organization in which people share some history. It develops as people work together, solve problems, cope with conflicts, achieve successes, and deal with tragedy. These cultures can be positive or poisonous.

(Schein, 1985; Deal and Peterson, 2009)

Types of Cultures

- Positive—Negative
- Strong—Weak
- Coherent—Fragmented
- Learning Communities—Stagnant Communities

Elements of Culture

- **Norms, Values and Beliefs that underlie thinking, feeling and acting**
- **Symbols and Artifacts that Communicate Meaning**
- **Stories that Herald Values**
- **Cultural Network**
- **Heroes and Heroines**
- **Rituals, Traditions, and Ceremonies**
- **“Culture is “the way we do things around here!”**



Key Roles of Cultural Leaders

READ the Culture

Historian and Anthropologist

ASSESS the Culture

Analyst and Evaluator

REINFORCE or TRANSFORM the Culture

Visionary, Symbol, Potter, Poet, Actor, and Healer

(Deal and Peterson, 1994; 2009)

Elements of Toxic Cultures

- **Negative Values and beliefs hold sway in toxic cultures.**
- **Sense of purpose is spiritually fragmented.**
- **Relationships are negative and destructive.**
- **The cultural network's most powerful members negaholics (Carter-Scott, 1989)**
- **The only heroes are anti-heroic.**
- **Few positive rituals, traditions, or ceremonies exist to develop a sense of community and hopefulness.**

Deal and Peterson (2009)

Positive Informal Network

- **Gossips**
- **Spies, Counterspies, Moles**
- **Heroines and Heroes**
- **Storytellers**
- **Compasses**
- **Navigators**
- **“ Keepers of the Dream “**

Toxic Informal Network

- **Anti-Heroes and Anti-Heroines**
- **Pessimistic Storytellers**
- **Rumor Mongers**
- **“Keepers of the Nightmare”**
- **Negaholics and Naysayers**
- **Prima Donnas**
- **Space Cadets**
- **Martyrs**
- **Deadwood, Driftwood, Ballast**
- **Saboteurs**
- **Rogue Pirates**
- **Resource Vultures**

Making the Informal Network Effective

- **Know who resides in each role**
- **Provide stages for storytellers**
- **Recognize heroes and heroines**
- **Use Gossips to pass information**
- **Work to decrease the negative impact of hostile roles**

Stories, Myths and Messages

- **Stories are the foundation of a culture.**
- **Stories communicate purpose, reinforce success, and maintain traditions.**
- **What are the history, stories, myths, and messages of the culture?**
- **Discuss the key stories and messages to tell newcomers and reinforce the culture.**
- **What negative stories of professional development damage the culture?**

Non-discussables Foster Toxicity

“The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of nondiscussables: the fewer nondiscussables, the healthier the school; the more nondiscussables, the more pathology in school culture. **Nondiscussables are subjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently for are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations only take place in the parking lot, the rest rooms, the playground, the carpool, or at the dinner table at home.**”

(Barth, Roland, “The Culture Builder,” *Educational Leadership*, 2002)

A NOTE OF CAUTION:

Nurture your culture or it can slide into negativity and eventually toxicity.

- Rapid Decline to Dysfunction
- The Slow Slide to Negativity
- Your own history of decline...

The Importance of Rituals, Ceremonies, and Celebrations

- Reinforce Values
- Build Culture and Community
- Recharge Motivation
- Communicate Purpose
- Celebrate Success

Ceremonies over the Year

- Map your ceremonies over the year
- Consider times without celebrations
- Identify the messages of the ceremony
- Are any ceremonies dead or negative?
- Be sure to celebrate
- Transform negative ceremonies into positive celebrations

Antidotes and Antibodies for Negativity

- Confront negativity head-on.
- Shield and support positive cultural elements
- Focus on careful hiring decisions
- Encourage those who are toxic to find new work
- Consciously eradicate negative behaviors and patterns
- Develop new stories of success and hope
- End old and dead ceremonies and replace them with new ones
- Celebrate the positive and possible at every opportunity

(Peterson and Deal, 2009)

“Teachers usually have no way of knowing that they have made a difference in a child's life, even when they have made a dramatic one...

Good teachers put snags in the river of children passing by, and, over the years, they redirect hundreds of lives...

[Great schools are] made up of people who can never really know the good they have done.”

Kidder (1989): *Among Schoolchildren*



Resources and Research



Research on Organizational Culture

Effective Schools Research (Edmonds)

Shaping School Culture (Deal and Peterson)

School Change Literature (Fullan)

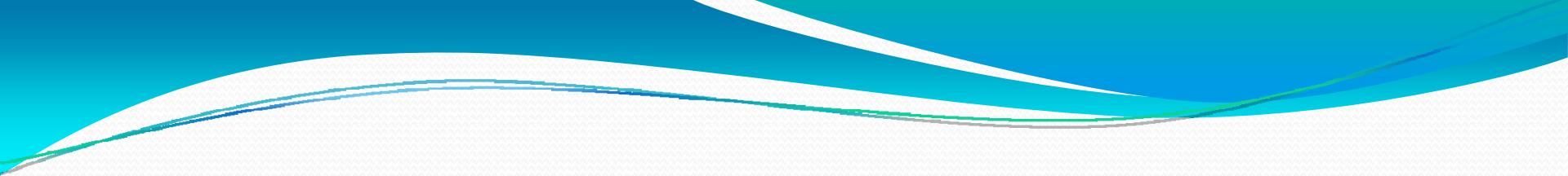
Professional Learning Communities (DuFour; Louis Kruse, et al)

Good to Great (Collins)

Balanced Leadership (Marzano et al)

Execution (Bossidy et al)

Principal Leadership (Robbins and Alvy)



Dr. Kent Peterson is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. He was the founding director of the Vanderbilt Principals Institute, Director of the National Center for Effective Schools, and a principal investigator for the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. Over the past two decades he has studied school leadership and the professional development of leaders. His research focuses on the realities of principals' work, school culture, and effective leadership. This research is being used in a variety of leadership academies in the U.S. and internationally. He has co-authored several books with Terrence Deal including **The Leadership Paradox**, (1994), **Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes, and Promises 2nd edition**, (2009), and the **Shaping School Culture Fieldbook 2nd edition** (2009). Over the past several years he has conducted workshops for ASCD, NSDC, NASSP, and for numerous state and national associations, districts, corporations, and educational organizations.



Slides adapted from work by Kent Peterson, Robert Scott, and Pam Robbins