understanding organizational culture

Recognizing and acknowledging the culture is essential to leading an organization, and ultimately enabling it to change and progress.

"What makes a king out of a slave? Courage! What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage! What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage!" (The Wizard of Oz, 1939). We probably all recall this lament from the Cowardly Lion in this classic movie, but perhaps the following twist on the quote might help us think about leadership and culture, and their role in education.

Have you ever walked into a school and had an immediate sense of how things got done around there? Culture! Do you know what your school district places a high value on? Culture! Do you know who has power or garners respect in your organization? Culture!

If you can answer in the affirmative, you have a sense of the culture of the organization. As an educational leader, if you cannot answer yes, you have a lot to learn or are in serious trouble. Recognizing, acknowledging and understanding culture is essential to leading the organization, and ultimately enabling it to change and progress.

Bolman and Deal in their book, "Shaping School Culture – The Heart of Leadership," write, "We believe the term culture provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their status."

As a leader, culture in an organization provides the framework within which you work every day. Healthy cultures with positive interactions, important traditions and avenues to celebrate the organization make it joyful to go to work. When school district cultures are not healthy, the students suffer.

Combined wisdom of 70 years in superintendency

When seven practicing and retired superintendents came together to write their second book, this one about effective board/superintendent relationships, they talked a great deal about the culture they inherited, developed or changed over their combined 70 plus years in the superintendency.

As one of those superintendents, I had served in two districts following long-term superintendents and had lots to learn about my new organizations. I believe I did some of that well in my second district and not so well in the first.

As a group, we talked about the steps we took (or missed) in understanding the culture of our district. We also discussed

By Peggy Lynch

how the understanding of the culture helped us be successful leaders in very different districts. What were those common learnings and threads of insight?

1. Honoring the past

Strong leaders understand the importance of the stories, myths and lore of the district and how they have shaped the culture: "Every community has a unique culture full of history and pride. The wise superintendent knows this. An even wiser superintendent takes the time to carefully observe, listen, document, reflect and affirm the history of the school community."

2. Recognizing the heroes

To succeed, it is essential to know who is important and why they are heroic: "Each spring we celebrate the newly selected group of individuals who have been designated as 'Living Treasures'. This grassroots process identifies individuals with integrity and passion who are willing to share their expertise with the community they love."

3. Participating in the rituals

Whether it is a welcome back event or retirement party, educational leaders are expected to be part of the practices that define district values: "None of my predecessors had attended all of the ceremonies that took place at the end of the school year, but I believed in the value of these rituals and made it a point to be there and tell the 'perfect' story at each one."

4. Understanding the rules and rewards

Where rules stemmed from, how people are rewarded and for what they are rewarded are telling parts of the culture: "After my first meeting as the new superintendent, I learned that a cultural norm for the organization was 'no questions asked' and that the act of questioning was perceived as disrespect and disloyalty. This behavior that had evolved during the tenure of several previous superintendents was one I knew required immediate change."

5. Acknowledging the communications systems

How, where and when people communicate are revealing aspects of a school district's culture: "Each year I developed a district word for the year. This word was communicated at the beginning of the year kick-off meetings and appeared on all district publications. It served as a reminder of our focus."

6. Recognizing the role of the physical environment

The conditions under which people work help define the culture: "Spaces are powerful. Significant research has been done on environments. Chrome, glass, black marble and white walls make a statement of slickness, efficiency and no nonsense. Conversely, upholstered chairs with wooden arms and plush sofas in earthy tones give a different feel entirely."

When leaders look at these aspects of their organization, they can evaluate what the shared values and beliefs are. Building on the shared values and on the six aspects of culture, leaders are able to move forward with the necessary relationships and knowledge to reshape the culture, if needed, and to continue the best aspects of the organization.

Signs of strong culture for high performance

But what are the signs of a strong culture of high performance? In an online piece from "American Society for Training and Development Journal" in 2001, Jeuchter, Fisher and Alford discuss five characteristics of such a culture. They are:
- The organization works from a strategic focus.
- People in the organization have a clear sense of reality.
- People work from commitment rather than compliance.
- People's behavior is aligned throughout the organization.
- The organization demonstrates a self-renewing dynamic of accomplishment, learning and change.

They also discuss how leaders can create a strong culture for high performance. Leaders do this when they create opportunities for people to communicate directly and honestly, work collaboratively with a spirit of alignment and partnership, demonstrate courage and capacity for risk-taking, demonstrate responsibility for themselves and ownership of the organization's goals, and embrace the organization's success as their own.

What we care about most

Each of the superintendents who worked on the book shared stories of their districts and the cultures that existed when they arrived. They talked about unhealthy and healthy cultures, how they had developed over time, and the challenges of changing the negative norms and sustaining the positive ones.

All of the superintendents recognized that focusing on the culture of the organization made a major contribution to their success as leaders and to the success of the school district. Without a strong culture of collaboration, respect and positive relationships, leaders find it difficult to focus on what we care about most — our students. ∎

Resources

Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (1991). *Reframing Organizations, Artistry, Choice, and Leadership.* San Francisco, CA and Oxford: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Deal, T. & Peterson, Kent D. (1999). *Shaping School Culture – The Art of Leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Jeuchter, W., Fisher, C. & Alford, R. (2001). *American Society for Training and Development Journal.* Online at www.astd.org

Johnston, G.; Gross, G.; Townsend, R.; Lynch, P.; Novotney, P.; Roberts, B.; Garcy, L. & Gil, L. (2002). *Eight at the Top.* Lanham, MD and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Peggy Lynch is superintendent of the San Dieguito Union High School District and co-author of the book, "Eight at the Top," (2002), published by Scarecrow Press. The new book, "Effective Superintendent-School Board Practices," is being published by Corwin Press this fall.