Creating a positive school culture
Chris Wheatley and Pete Wilkes

Opinion piece
Creating a positive school culture: how leaders can measure success and areas for improvement beyond test scores
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As the effectiveness of schools and school leadership is increasingly measured by statistical outcomes, leaders can often overlook how important it is to create a positive culture or environment to enable these outcomes to occur. It is universally understood that a school with a fully embedded, positive culture will ensure successfully student achievement. However, the creation, nurturing and sustaining of this can be, at times, underplayed. Measuring short-term levels, statistical progress and targets becomes the major driver for leaders rather than understanding the importance of creating the climate to get there.

If vision is the destination, culture is the route

It is of primary importance that a school leader understands that the creation of a positive school culture can enhance all practice within the school. Conversely, a negative/toxic culture will erode success, and ensure that even if the school is achieving, the achievement is fragile, short term and can easily break down.

The culture of the school can quite simply be defined as ‘its personality’ – what is it about the school that makes it what it is? It is the leaders of the school who are the custodians of this ‘culture’. They define, shape and create it. They develop and empower others to embrace it. They enable sustainability of it.

But what is it?

Culture is created from a set of values and beliefs intrinsic to the school: what the school is, what is important to the school, what is at its heart… its moral purpose. This can be seen as ‘fluffy’ by some and ‘low priority’ by others, however the creation of a tangible, positive culture is the real measure of success for a school and its leaders.

How many times have you heard prospective parents articulate that they knew the school was right for their child as soon as they entered through the door? How many times as a student teacher did you enter a staff room for the first time worried about where to sit or which cup to take for a drink, in the fear of upsetting someone on the staff if you used their mug? Culture is powerful.

A measure of success of the effectiveness of a school culture can be achieved quite simply. On entry through the front door of your school what do you see? Feel? Hear? Are people made to feel welcome? Do people smile? Is the environment inspiring, bright and vibrant? Further evidence may be gathered in the staff room: how do people talk to each other? What do they talk about? How do they develop and build their relationships with parents and children? A successfully embedded, positive culture should underpin every aspect of behaviour throughout the school. A confident school leader should be able to ask any person external to the school to judge the overall school success from the ‘tangible’ – what you see, feel, hear – before any statistical measure on a spreadsheet. Without the school knowing what it truly stands for, the real potential for student achievement will never be achieved to maximum capability.
How a positive culture can be created

The leader has to model the culture they want to portray in everything they do. For example, if the creation of respect throughout the organisation is a desirable element for the culture then the leader must model this at all times with children, parents, staff and the community. It has to be constant, consistent, unwavering and overt.

Systems to support the implementation of this culture need to be created. For example, if enabling confident, articulate children to be empowered in their own achievement is a driving factor in your vision, what support systems are set in the school? Has the school got learning committees? Support groups? Self-managed clubs and committees? Learning journey journals? Assembly-delivery opportunities? Peer mentors? Visitor leads and tour guides? School and class councils with real engagement and responsibility? As a leader, every newly introduced action needs to be part of the overall strategy. The leader needs to recognise the opportunity to introduce a new system and consider what impact it will have on enhancing the culture.

Is the leader responsible for sustaining the school culture?

Although the leader is the driving force behind the culture, a skilled leader will empower others within the school and community to support the culture they wish to embed. They will illustrate its importance and the role and responsibility everyone has to play in promoting a positive culture. If all understand it, believe in it and act upon it, the culture will be sustained.

To achieve this, the leader must motivate others to want to support the ethos. They must pick out positive incidents regularly and publicly praise, with integrity, those that are enhancing the culture, and offer support to those who find it hard and challenge those who undermine it. When recruiting staff, culture should be considered. Will this newcomer to the school enhance the school culture we’re trying to create or jeopardise it?

Enrolling support for the creation of a positive school culture from those who refuse or find it difficult to engage is one of the most challenging leadership tasks of all. A united front where all staff add positively to the culture of the school is the ideal; ‘all singing from the same hymn sheet’ is an over-used phrase and often (in extremely large organisations) difficult to achieve.

The success of the management of this situation lies in the strategic planning of the leader. Regardless of supportive systems, effective recruitment, clear and continuous role modelling, motivating and praising, training and continuing professional development, there may be incidents in which, after all of these strategies have been used, individuals within the organisation still find it hard to consistently support the school ethos. The skilled leader, if faced with this difficulty, will marginalise the impact of this negativity and the potential damage to the overall school culture. They may strategically pair such an individual with a strong individual who is fully secure in their understanding and belief of how the school should be. They may philosophically challenge the person in a professional manner, highlighting exactly what climate they are trying to achieve and identifying ways the individual could support this in the future. Whatever strategy the leader decides upon, they must tackle this issue with just as much energy, commitment and enthusiasm as they would with an individual who has the potential to enhance the school culture. Only then will the school maximise its potential for achieving the most effective school culture.

The measure of success, as in most leadership challenges, is how effective we are at articulating what we want our culture to be. How do we enrol others to believe in and own the culture too? An ultimate test of success would be that when we leave the school, does the culture survive and thrive or does it leave with the leader?

The challenge is to engage, support, sustain and grow: As the industrialist Henry Ford is said to have remarked: ‘Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success’.
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