

Changing Culture as a New Principal

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Abstract

Many change efforts in schools fail to create the desired lasting change because they do not consider the current school culture. This is especially challenging for a principal beginning in a new school. Using Schein's (2004) definition of culture, this article guides school leaders in diagnosing culture and creating an environment where lasting change can take root. It assumes a goal of transformational leadership as opposed to transactional leadership. Lasting change will most likely grow in an environment where the urgency for the change is demonstrated balanced with safety for the teachers and other stakeholders. Change will continue from its initial stages when a leader provides short term wins to demonstrate a vision which is coming to fruition and is beneficial.

Keywords: culture, change, managing, new school, leadership, principal

Changing Culture as a New Principal

In leadership one of the most ubiquitous and thorny challenges is orchestrating lasting change. This is particularly true for many leaders entering new schools amid expectations for school improvement and a shift in institutional direction. Although the change being sought can be relatively small, when it is not in consonance with the prevailing culture it becomes a challenging undertaking. Any successful change effort is predicated on a thoughtful approach to the current culture and how it might be successfully altered. Many of the efforts to produce change at schools and districts are negatively affected by a lack of mindfulness surrounding school culture. A new leader must demonstrate insight and foresight into how he or she will roll out new initiatives in light of prevailing culture. Too often, major issues are either tiptoed around or there is no "buy in" from staff which quickly presents as either passive aggressive behavior or outright efforts to undermine the new leader's initiatives.

Diagnosing Culture

Successful principals spend time understanding what is going on in a new school before they formulate a plan of action. This data gathering usually comes in two forms: observations and conversations. A principal who is new to a school benefits from spending time observing all aspects of the school day. Time spent speaking with teachers, students, parents and administrators about improvement areas and what they perceive as the roadblocks and challenges gives the principal insight into how changes might be received by the school community. Open or semi-structured interviews tend to elicit the best data for diagnosing culture (Harrison, 2005). The data from these observations and conversations should then be analyzed with a coherent framework for understanding culture. One helpful framework Schein's (2004) three-part formulation of culture.

Schein breaks the concept of culture into three distinct layers. The first layer is *artifacts* which in a school setting is largely visible through observations. What is in the hallways? What is posted on the classroom walls? As you walk around the building, what does it seem is valued in this institution? The second level is *espoused values* – what the members of the school community say they care about. Conducting both formal and informal meetings will produce a breadth of opinions and thoughts about espoused values. The final area of culture Schein describes is *underlying assumptions*. This aspect of culture is the least visible and the most important for a change agent to understand. What are the unchallenged (and maybe unchallengeable) assumptions which undergird the way things work at this school?

A school leader can begin to plan for the change they seek only once they have analyzed the culture. The leader must consider what components of the prevailing culture may be challenged when change is implemented. Soliciting opinions of trusted external people in analyzing the culture is frequently helpful.

Resistance to Change

At its core, successfully navigating a change effort means overcoming the normal human resistance to change which teachers and other staff will experience. Change requires us to give up what is familiar and comfortable while mourning the loss of the status quo (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). This natural opposition to change can be exacerbated in an educational setting by the relative transience of school leaders. Many teachers may rely on the fact that leadership changes can be relatively quick and therefore choose not to follow the initiatives of a new leader.

According to the 2012-13 principal staffing survey from the US Department of Education (Goldring & Taie, 2014), over 20 percent of principals left their schools that year. Additionally, more than half of principals had been at their school five years or less and over a third had only three years in their current schools. A 2014 report (CHURN) paints an even grimmer picture stating that half of new principals leave by their third year. A new principal will frequently encounter a skeptical, “wait and see” attitude to new leadership and change initiatives.

Leading Change

Achieving lasting change in a school has a good deal to do with how successfully the principal partners with teachers and other school stakeholders. *Transformational leadership* is a term first coined by Burns (1978) which he contrasted with *transactional leadership*. Instead of a leader simply convincing others to accomplish tasks by rewarding them (transactional leadership), transformational leadership is sharing a vision with others and journeying with them in a mutually ennobling way towards organizational improvement. A principal in a new school should aspire to such leadership and partnership with stakeholders in the school community. To accomplish this, a leader will need to provide three things: safety, urgency and short-term wins.

Safety

To deal with the sense of loss which reinforces reticence to change, a leader must create a safe space for real communication. Although the culture will be the last thing to change, it must be considered from the first moment the plan is created. In order to identify the next small step in your larger plan, the goal needs to be very clear. This clarity can't exist only in the mind of the leader, it must be communicated and accepted by the stakeholder groups in the school. A school leader needs to constantly express his or her vision for where the school is headed.

If no safe environment is created for the staff, negative environments will quickly grow in the vacuum. A school leader must create individual and group opportunities for real dialogue, moving the discussion which usually takes place in the parking lot after the staff meetings to this, more productive, space. A successful leader will create and facilitate a space where teachers can freely and safely express concerns, even when this may illicit difficult feelings and negative feedback.

I experienced this as an administrator in a school where there was a raging debate among the staff about the proper approach to homework. The tension was complicated by the fact that many of the teachers were also parents with children at the school and this colored their beliefs about homework, adding a lot of unnecessary emotion to the conversation. Approaching this issue as a staff required a positive forum for real discussion. I ran a number of staff meetings around the subject of homework in a way which made it safe to disagree. I showed staff a number of statements about the purpose of homework, many of which were incendiary and more extreme than any teacher would really express. I gently forced staff to take a stand and explain themselves but I made sure it felt OK for others to disagree. By offering exaggerated perspectives on the matter which were not tied to any individual it allowed teachers to disagree

without in a less personal way. Additionally, by presenting extreme opinions common ground emerged.

The most critical prerequisite for creating this atmosphere is to have the trust of your staff. Gaining the staff's trust is a process which begins before you even enter the building and it never stops. Leaders who are trusted have a sense of humility around subjects and exhibit curiosity rather than top down over-confidence or a *fait accompli* attitude about policy. A principal needs to repeatedly ask for teacher feedback, admit errors readily and identify areas they would like assistance or input.

Frequently, good preparation and follow up make the task of shifting the culture easier and more lasting. When the change effort threatens a sensitive cultural area, transparency and lead time are very important. Identify the issue in writing before trying to speak about it to a large audience or have individual conversations with influential teachers, or both. Once you have presented ideas about why a change might be necessary, create a language and then continue to refer to it. Having a catch phrase which you can sprinkle into later conversations and communications will help keep the idea "sticky" and in the back of people's minds.

Urgency

To overcome the loss that accompanies change requires both intellectual and emotional buy-in. Heath & Heath (2013) use the imagery of a rider on an elephant as symbolic of the big emotions (the elephant) and the intellect which tries to steer them (the rider). While a clear plan may appeal to the intellectual side of things, an emotional appeal is also necessary. A change must demonstrate the urgency of change to his team. This process requires moving people away from a behavior they are used to and sometimes quite attached to. Care and understanding coupled with an acknowledgment that the misguided practice comes from a good place, will help

the team approach real change positively. Kotter (1996) gives an example where a new head of a department held a “eulogy” for the outdated manual which he was replacing. He gave the manual a proper sendoff, recognizing how it had gotten them through many years in the industry but also demonstrating the need for changing with the shifting realities.

This idea can be highlighted through the following example. An enterprising manager who wanted to create buy in for more streamlined purchasing policies gathered the many types of gloves (424!) which were purchased by different areas of the company along with their prices and made a huge mound of gloves for division presidents to look at (Heath & Heath, 2013). Looking at the pile of gloves made a visceral emotional argument which logic alone never would have and he got the support he needed to make the change.

Teachers and staff must become aware of the external criticism and internal difficulties which are driving the change. Although there are times when an administrator’s role is to handle critical parents so that teachers can focus on teaching, it is powerful to have teachers hear directly from those who are negatively affected by the current status quo. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to understand the current challenges, and even to dialogue directly with those who are looking for change, can be very eye opening.

Conducting staff development sessions focused on areas the leader feels require change may help staff gain an awareness of the need for change. As a new principal in a school I voiced a viewpoint that did not fit into the culture at the time in a staff meeting. I identified the viewpoint as countercultural and then challenged staff to explain this other viewpoint. By immediately identifying this idea as one which I understood would cause discomfort and not tying the perspective to anyone I created a sense of safety while still framing the need to consider this perspective. In another situation, I identified a culture where confrontation and debate were

avoided. I led a teacher session on having difficult conversations, based on the work done by the Harvard negotiation project (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), to give teachers practice in discussing difficult issues and changes. Using case studies that mirrored some of the current staff issues and challenges gave teachers insight into why this was an important skill set for our staff.

Kotter and Cohen (2002) tell the story of a leader who incidentally heard from a frustrated customer who had a recurring issue which remained unaddressed even after bringing it up numerous times with the leader's employees. This leader videoed the client explaining the issue and then showed the video to a few hundred employees in groups of about fifty. In general, the employees were surprised and galvanized to action. Similarly in a school setting, sharing direct communication from parents or stakeholders through video or email is also a way to create urgency. Instead of shielding teachers from the feedback that is an impetus for change, let them experience the feedback directly. At a professional development session on communication I read a lengthy email from a parent who was very disappointed in our communication as a school. It was a difficult email to receive and sharing it with staff helped them to understand the urgency of better communication with parents.

Show, then tell

Another key element of sustaining the change effort is demonstrating the success of the venture by highlighting short term wins (Kotter, 1996). The two goals of short term wins are: to show that the effort expended for this change is worthwhile, and to demonstrate that the vision is working. The short terms wins chosen to pursue and highlight should be small improvements aligned to the larger change effort. An easy change which isn't really a step towards the goal is a poor choice. Similarly, efforts which are a step in the larger change effort but don't create excitement will not accomplish the goals of short term wins. The short-term win needs to speak

for itself and accomplish both goals. A change agent needs to ask themselves, “What would be a step in the right direction which would improve the school in a tangible and demonstrable way?”.

Highlighting short term wins can also help to “shrink the change”, making the change effort seem less daunting. Heath (p.126) gives an example of a car wash where they structured their promotion in two different ways. One group was given a punch card where they needed 10 stamps to get a free wash, but they got two punches right away. The other group received a punch card which required eight washes to get a free wash. A few months later 19% of the 8-stamp group got a free wash compared to 34% of the other group. We can motivate action by helping people think they are closer to the goal.

When I was looking to increase teacher-initiated parent communication in my school I encouraged teachers to send emails out before report card were released if they felt that parents might be surprised by their child’s grades. This was a small step toward more proactive communication, but it spoke for itself when they got positive parent emails in response and avoided having to speak to angry parents reactively. This highlighted the benefits of proactive communication which set the stage for the next step towards more robust communication. I also made sure to positively reinforce teachers who sent out the emails (individually as well as publicly) to encourage more of the same.

The psychology of short-term wins can also be applied on the larger scale of choosing areas of focus as a new principal. When considering which change effort to embark on first, two critical elements are high visibility and low friction. An area which is notorious for complaints may be an example of high visibility, and the community will benefit most from this change effort. Conversely, an area that creates minimal friction will help initiate positive change.

Conclusion

Introducing change is never easy and for the change to last it must be aligned with the culture. This requires careful planning to successfully begin incrementally changing the culture immediately while realizing that the culture will be the last thing to change. By first observing and conversing to understand the culture and then crafting a change effort which recognizes the complexities of cultural change, a school leader is far more likely to achieve lasting change.

We may think of a change effort as a plant which needs the right environment and nutrients to grow. The proper emotional balance between keeping urgency high while still guaranteeing safety in processing the change is the environment which is most enriching for the growth of the change effort. Once the change effort has been launched and begins to grow, short term wins are the nutrients which will keep it growing well.

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