The Role of Leaders in Developing a Positive Culture

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Abstract

Principals play a vital role in determining school culture. This culture sets the context within which staff and students work; therefore, it is important that school leaders strive to create a positive culture. This paper examines collaboration, development of staff, provision of resources, transparency of vision, management of workplace stress, and professional development of school leaders as tools to create a positive school culture. These areas are based on my professional experience as a coach and teacher, in addition to current research.

As front line leaders in schools, principals play an important role in developing the culture of a school. Student success in learning and staff success in teaching can be hindered or aided by the culture that is developed by school leaders. The culture of a school is a mix of the norms, values, attitudes, behaviours, and traditions that define the school; culture develops as people interact and work together (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Every school has a culture within which its stakeholders operate. The tone of school leadership helps to determine whether the culture is toxic, indifferent, or focused on growth (Barth, 2002). As a coach and educator, I have experienced both toxic and growth-oriented cultures. Throughout my research, I considered practices that contributed to the different cultures I have experienced, and I sought to find literature on current practices that promote positive culture. Through this process, I pinpointed six areas that can greatly influence the culture and success of a school, based on the decisions of administrators: collaboration, development of staff, provision of resources, the transparency of their vision, management of workplace stress, and their own professional development. Principals should strive to make decisions that create a positive culture. Schools are naturally resistant to change; therefore, once a school develops its culture, all standards and innovations within that school will be subject to the culture that exists (Barth, 2002). For these reasons, it is important that school leaders understand the crucial role that they play in developing a culture that maximizes student and staff success and minimizes stress for these same groups.

The level of collaboration among staff in a school is a major determinant of whether the culture of that school is positive or negative. Schools that have high levels of collaboration among staff tend to promote higher behavioural and academic standards (Bettini, Crockett, Brownell, & Merrill, 2016). Many principals have implemented professional learning communities (PLCs) to create a collaborative culture that improves teaching and learning (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Teachers are more likely to improve their efficacy when they work with others who are experts in the same subject area. Many schools implement middle leaders, those who are experienced in teaching and interacting with a subject, to lead and focus PLC meeting time (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, & Ronnerman, 2016). Middle leaders can more effectively lead PLCs, when compared to a principal, because they are immersed in the professional learning and teaching practices of the school (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). As a beginning teacher, I worked in an environment where there was little collaboration. I spent countless hours planning and creating lessons while I struggled to learn new content. This was a very challenging and lonely experience that caused me to consider leaving the profession. Had collaboration been promoted among staff, I believe that I would have had more supports to aid me through this process. Promoting collaboration among staff members, with proper focus and leadership, creates a positive environment in which teachers can share best practices that are responsive to student needs. Thus, principals can positively influence their school culture through the use of strategies that encourage collaboration.

Teaching can be a very isolating career; schools with positive cultures have principals whose leadership style creates a supportive environment to develop staff. Leadership styles that

do not promote the development of staff and focus on staff being responsible for their own development nurture a negative school culture (Du Plessis, Carroll, & Gilles, 2015). Communication is essential in creating a supportive environment wherein staff members feel comfortable approaching leaders. Principals can encourage communication by informing staff of how, when, and where they can communicate concerns (Stickle & Scott, 2016). Praise and recognition for good work, and showing an understanding work-life balance, create an atmosphere wherein employees feel valued and there is a sense of trust and team (Stickle & Scott, 2016). When leaders show an awareness of employees' needs and seek to support those needs, they create a culture of caring that better develops staff (Du Plessis et al., 2015). When staff feel appreciated and understood, they are more likely to communicate issues that are difficult to address. The more issues that staff members are comfortable communicating to leaders, the more positive the culture and health of the school will be because the teachers feel supported (Barth, 2002). Through six years of coaching, I have found that I can create a strong level of trust with the athletes I coach by openly communicating my standards and providing opportunities for them to bring forward their concerns. This has cultivated a positive culture in the football program and created a culture of trust in the program. Leaders who create a culture of open communication, praise employees for good work, and show awareness of employees' needs create a positive school culture and better develop their staff members.

Creating a positive culture in a school requires that administrative leaders provide access to the necessary resources for successful teaching. Instructional resources influence how teachers present their lessons, the scope of instruction, and how teachers evaluate learning (Bettini et al., 2016). Thus, available instructional resources (books, supplies, technology, curriculum supports) influence the quality of classroom instruction. Teachers with ready access to strong curriculum resources experience higher levels of success, as compared to teachers who do not have this access (Bettini et al., 2016). Teachers with the right resources are better able to manage their classrooms and teach students the required content, but teachers who lack the correct resources experience lack of confidence, increased disconnectedness, and breakdowns in communication (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Leaders who focus on the resource needs of their staff create conditions that encourage staff to develop so that students achieve their goals more effectively (Bredeson, 2006). At the start of my career, I struggled to find meaningful curriculum resources to aid my planning. I was unaware of the resources available to me, and I underwent a time-consuming process of research, trial, and error. This resulted in many challenges for me as an educator and a less-than-ideal environment for my students. In contrast, today my school has a continuous improvement coach who helps teachers to acquire appropriate curricular supports. By providing the correct resources, leaders empower their teachers to be more successful, which promotes a positive culture within the school.

Parents, students, and staff need to understand their leader's vision for their school, in order to understand and believe in that vision. A culture of transparency and openness helps parents, students and staff to support their school leaders. Leaders can create this transparency by communicating their goals and beliefs (Peterson & Deal, 1998) by such means as social media, home visits, and leadership meetings with parents. A culture that is transparent and involves the community fosters relationships that can be beneficial in difficult times (Schwartz, 2014). One of the best ways that principals can be transparent is to clarify their non-negotiable standards (Westerberg, 2016). A short list of non-negotiable standards reduces unpredictability and improves relationships and trust. Another way to promote transparency is by being a visible member of the school population. Simply being visible in common areas of the school, attending extra-curricular events, and visiting students and teachers in the classroom creates a culture of trust that inspires students and staff to view principals as more than just enforcers of rules (Westerberg, 2016). Organizations who develop a strong vision and transparently communicate this vision experience higher levels of success. As a coach, I have experienced the results of developing and communicating a strong vision. The football program that I coach struggled for

many years with attendance, fundraising, and attitude. In response, the coaching staff developed a vision for the program based upon character, commitment, and competition. This vision was accompanied by an off-season program and was clearly communicated to athletes, parents, and coaches. In response, the program has experienced improved attendance, fundraising, and participation levels. Being visible, engaging with the school community, and providing a clear vision create a level of transparency that builds a positive school culture.

Stress is a part of any work environment; how that stress is dealt with can significanlaty affect the culture of that workplace. Leaders need to understand stress and the consequences of stress, in order to avoid negative outcomes caused by workplace stress (Stickle & Scott, 2016). One of the strongest ways to combat stress in the workplace is to develop stress intervention policies and provide resources that encourage employees to deal with their stress in a healthy way. School leaders need to be mindful of the effect that they can have on their employees' stress levels. It is important that leaders know how they interact with others and how their personal interactions and behaviours can stress individuals within their organization (Stickle & Scott, 2016). Running an educational facility can be extremely demanding on a principal's time and can distract him/her from issues such as teacher stress. If teachers bring concerns to a principal and they are not dealt with in a timely manner, the staff members may feel insecure and exacerbate their feelings of stress (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Failing to deal with staff concerns can create a toxic culture within the school. When a principal takes time to listen to the employees' concerns and addresses them in a timely manner, it helps to reduce stress on those employees. The provision of a comfortable workspace that has reasonable noise and temperature levels can also reduce employee stress (Stickle & Scott, 2016). By developing an awareness of stressors in the workplace and providing resources and strategies to reduce workplace stressors, principals can influence the school culture in a positive manner.

In order to create a positive culture, leaders need to engage in their own professional development. The quality of a school's leadership is linked to its overall student achievement (Miller et al., 2016). One of the most important forms of professional development is involvement with a learning community that supports and mentors school leaders (Schwartz, 2014). Learning communities embolden leaders to seek feedback, share ideas, and receive support when they are struggling. Support from learning communities can reduce feelings of isolation and pressure that accompany leadership positions, which will in turn promote collegiality with their school and help them to develop a positive school culture (Du Plessis et al., 2015). School leaders who engage in professional development express that they are better able to handle complex change and experience greater confidence in instructional leadership. These principals encourage the following behaviours in their schools: (1) more collaboration between teachers, (2) more feedback from parents in the community, (3) greater focus on goals for learning the curriculum, and (4) higher standards of teaching (Miller et al., 2016). Principals set the tone, direction, and expectations of professional development in their school by what they do and what actions they reward (Bredeson, 2006). Professional development is critical to me as an educator and coach. Every year, I strive to improve my craft as a teacher and coach by attending professional development sessions, listening to podcasts on my subject areas, and observing others in their practice. In the past, I have experienced times when professional development was not a priority, and the learning environment was negatively affected as a result. I believe that as my students watch me learn and grow as an educator, it empowers them to do the same. Principals who model professional development encourage staff and students to follow their example, which in turn nurtures a positive school culture.

Principals are responsible for creating successful teaching and learning environments for staff and students. In doing so, they need to ensure that the culture of the school is positive. Leaders who succeed in developing a positive school culture encourage collaboration between teachers, in order to ensure that best practices are shared and that teachers are working toward a common goal. In addition to collaboration, leaders need to create a supportive environment that provides feedback and promotes open communication in order to develop staff members.

Principals who ensure that their staff members have the necessary classroom resources create a strong level of trust in the leadership of the school. Leading in a transparent way that clearly communicates the school's vision and involves all stakeholders promotes trust in one's leadership. Reducing workplace stress and providing strategies and resources to cope with this stress in a positive manner encourages trust between leadership and teachers. Finally, strong leaders encourage development in their staff by engaging in their own professional development with learning communities of fellow school leaders. School leaders play an essential role in developing a positive school culture that promotes student and staff development. Strong school leaders implement the discussed strategies to create this positive culture.

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