Introduction

Culture Shock

We have it in our power to begin the world again.

—Thomas Paine, author of
Common Sense (1776)

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My widowed mother died when I was a 16-year-old sophomore in high school. I had to move away to live with my older sister in another (and much larger) city. I was uprooted from a small community of 2,000 residents where I knew everyone and was replanted in an urban high school of 2,000 students where I knew no one. In midyear. With little or no preparation. That's culture shock!

I felt lost and overwhelmed. I didn't know how to fit in. I didn't know the unwritten rules and roles, the insider jokes, the code words, or the secret handshake. I didn't know the history, the traditions, the stories, the heroes, the values, the taboos, or the boundaries. I soon learned that the pecking order of the culture relegated newcomers to a marginal role in the life of the school.

My grades suffered. My confidence and fragile teenage psyche suffered. I suffered. I felt like an outsider—disconnected and invisible. The culture seemed impenetrable. It wasn't at all welcoming, accepting, supportive, or empowering for me. It took a full year and a half for me to begin to get back on track and to reclaim my voice and my place at the fire.

But by all commonly accepted measures and standards, this was not a bad school. It had a rich history, a good reputation, distinguished alumni, fine facilities (including a bell tower and even a mast from the historic U.S.S. *Constitution*, known as "Old Ironsides"), prestigious faculty, and a world-class curriculum. But it didn't work for me.

For a vulnerable teenager, the culture of the organization was a much greater influence than its image, buildings, programs, or faculty credentials. That's the way it is in schools—and in most human institutions. It's not the edifices or external trappings that matter most. It's the unseen, unpublicized, and undocumented culture of the organization that really makes all the difference.

Of course, my unfortunate experience in high school wasn't all that unique. It is potentially repeated (in varying forms and degrees of intensity) every time a child enters a new class, changes schools, or moves to the next-higher level. And it's not just newcomers who are affected (positively or negatively) by cultural imperatives, expectations, standards, and demands. Everyone is.

More than any other single factor or influence, the organizational culture promotes, allows, or limits individual and group performance and success. In most schools, kids make it—or don't—largely because of the existing culture. Not just the new kids. But all kids. And adults, too.

Culture counts! In every school—in your school—how people relate, interact, communicate, talk to each other, talk about each other, and solve problems together (or not) is a significantly greater determiner of success than class size, what courses are taught, what books are used, or how much money is spent. The best school leaders in the business understand this and consciously do something about it. You should, too.

Want a better school? Better-trained teachers can help. So can spiffed-up facilities. And so can more up-to-date curriculum and materials. Adding more tests may also help some. But improving relationships and the overall culture of the school will help most of all.

Bad schools have toxic cultures that work against pupil learning, teacher effectiveness, parent involvement, and community support. Contrarily, good schools have healthy, supportive, affirming, and liberating cultures that work for everyone—even the shy new kid on the block.

Good or bad, school cultures are organic. They grow and change. Leaders can change them. Effective administrators do it all the time. And best of all, it doesn't cost any more to create a healthy culture than to create an unhealthy one.

Unfortunately, many school officials don't know much about the culture of their own school or pay much attention to the sociology of the organization. They just let the culture "happen." It's a huge mistake and, sometimes, a fatal one.

In administrator school, prospective and practicing principals and superintendents learn a great deal about school law, finance, budgeting, contract negotiations, tests and measurements, statistics, scheduling, pupil transportation, curriculum development, learning theory, child psychology, and much more. Whew!

They usually don't, however, learn very much about how to create a positive school culture. In fact, it seems that *avoiding* this topic is part of the culture in some graduate schools.

So culture building is often the one "must-learn" subject that no one ever teaches you anything about. It's also the one major reform the reformers most often forget.

Naturally, there are other ways to learn about shaping school cultures than going to school. Painful experience and trial and error might work. But at what cost? A much easier and simpler way is to tap into existing knowledge and the wisdom and experience of other successful school leaders, past and present. That's where this little book comes in.

Don't Teach the Canaries Not to Sing is a primer on the invisible curriculum—the organizational culture that determines what kind of place the school really is. Not intended as a research report, this guide draws on a broad spectrum of experiential and anecdotal material to give busy readers practical, day-in and day-out tips for making the school a better place to teach and learn. Through concrete real-world examples, insider insights, and down-to-earth explanations, the following pages demystify the phenomenon of school culture. Without resorting to lofty (and unintelligible) jargon or obtuse psychobabble, the text clearly defines what the culture of a school is, where it comes from, how it works, and why it is critically important.

More significant, each chapter is packed with the specific information, guidelines, skills, strategies, initiatives, and techniques needed—as well as the warning signs and pitfalls to avoid—to create a school culture that works for everyone and makes possible peak performances by students and teachers, along with maximum support from parents and community members.

A school isn't just a building. Or a bunch of books. Or whatever it says in the parent handbook. It is a complex web of relationships, rules, roles, and rewards that make up the real teaching and learning environment.

Effective school leaders strive to shape this environment to benefit all stakeholders. You don't want to do any less for your school. That's reason enough to read on.

Best of all, this no-nonsense little book can become the user's manual on school cultures that you can't get elsewhere. Reading it will force you to look at your organization in a different way—and, just maybe, to really see it for the very first time. Can you afford not to take a look?