1

School Culture

How We Do Things Around Here

How often has this happened? A new or existing principal is faced with moving his or her school through some major reform effort and puts together an ambitious plan to get *it* done, complete with goals, objectives, timelines, and designated responsibilities. The plan has been presented to the staff, who has responded cautiously, not at all, or negatively. The administrator begins to move the process forward and runs into the proverbial brick wall. The school is going through the motions of change, but in reality, nothing is really changing in the way the school does business.

Two scenarios play themselves out over and over again in secondary schools engaged in the reform process. Both scenarios involve the hidden attribute "school culture." One scenario involves a new principal or co-administrator who doesn't know or understand the culture of the school. The second scenario involves an administrator who has been at the school for a number of years but fails to consider the culture of the school when designing strategies to implement a reform initiative.

Simply put, culture refers to "the way we do things around here." School culture reflects how long the school has been in existence (those pesky traditions!); how long the staff has been there; who the major players are on the staff; norms; past practices; belief systems; and what is valued, honored, and celebrated at the school. Jerry L. Thacker and William D. McInerney (1992) found a significant correlation between

school culture and student achievement, thereby making the case that principals *must* consider the school culture as part of the overall process of developing and beginning any reform initiative.

What *Is* Organizational Culture?

The culture of a school is often the mirror of the local community culture. Moving a school through a reform process requires a change in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the external environment, as well as the school. The culture of a school has a direct impact on the success or failure of the implementation of a reform initiative.

Patterson, Purkey, and Parker (1986) provide a summary of information on the impact of school culture:

- School culture does affect the behavior and achievement of elementary and secondary school students (though the effect of classroom and student variables remains greater).
- School culture does not fall from the sky; it is created and thus can be manipulated by people within the school.
- School cultures are unique—whatever their commonalities, no two schools will be exactly alike, nor should they be.
- To the extent that it provides a focus and clear purpose for the school, culture becomes the cohesion that bonds the school together as it goes about its mission.
- Though we concentrate on its beneficial nature, culture can be counterproductive and an obstacle to educational success; culture can also be oppressive and discriminatory for various subgroups within the school.
- Lasting fundamental change (e.g., changes in teaching practice or the decision-making structure) requires understanding and, often, altering the school's culture; cultural change is a slow process.

The culture of a school organization is made up of the core values and beliefs that drive the behavior of individuals within that organization. The culture can be either positive or negative, and consequently can work for you or against you. The culture of an organization has a tremendous influence on how people will react to outside initiatives. Needless to say, this will be especially difficult if the initiative is contrary to the underlying beliefs, values, assumptions, and rewarded behaviors of the school culture. A current example is the cultural struggle between the notion of "*All* students can learn" espoused in

the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, and the historically culturally embedded notion in many schools that all students can learn *if* they are academically at grade level, can speak English, have no learning disabilities, have parents who support the work of the schools, are self-motivated and self-disciplined, attend school regularly, and do their homework.

It is imperative that the principal understand the school's culture and how it evolved. This is even more essential during a time of change, and it can be considered a critical, and often overlooked, attribute of the change process. These core beliefs and values act as a lens for people within the organization to evaluate and shape a change initiative into what they perceive it should be. The best-intentioned principal will have little success unless he or she is able to understand the school's culture at a deep level and has the skills to shape that culture to encourage people to change their behavior.

Often, a principal will first try to change the *attitudes and beliefs* of the faculty as the primary goal in changing the school culture. As Rick DuFour (2003) points out, the attitudes will probably be the last thing to change. The reason: past experiences result in current beliefs; beliefs reflect attitudes. In order to change beliefs and attitudes, it will be necessary to provide opportunities to gain new and positive experiences, thereby resulting in new or revised beliefs and, eventually, attitudes. This means that the culture cannot change *unless people change their current behaviors.* Recent studies have shown that many reform initiatives fail because the leadership has not addressed the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the stakeholders, reflected as the culture of the school. The strategic planning process (see Chapter 3) begins with an examination of the shared beliefs of all school stakeholders.

The physical representation of the culture of an organization may be found in the artifacts that represent "the way things are done around here." These may include bell schedules, assembly topics, slogans, discipline handbooks and suspension forms, teacher evaluation documents, and so forth. The principal has the opportunity to create and support new artifacts as the school culture begins to evolve and change to align with the shared vision of improving student achievement. What are some of the artifacts at your school that represent the school culture? And what do they say about your school?

Key Components of a School's Culture

So, how *do* you begin to explore and define a school's culture? *The Framework for Analysis of School Culture* (California Department of

Education, nd.) identifies some specific elements that contribute to the definition of a school's culture. These include Heroes and Heroines; Communication Network; Rites and Rituals; Lore and Myths; Rules, Rewards, and Sanctions; and Physical Environment. These elements are a valuable tool to assist in developing a clear understanding of the culture of a school. The following section will explore each element in greater depth.

Heroes and Heroines

The "heroes and heroines" of a school are those individuals who are recognized as role models that exemplify the organization's traditions, values, and beliefs. They are looked up to by other members of the staff and generally set the tone for "the way we do things around here." Examples might include the long-standing head football coach; a counselor who is actively involved in providing college counseling to students; and a foreign language teacher who mentors new teachers on taking attendance, making out grade reports, and so forth.

Communication Network

Every organization has an instantaneous (and often accurate) communication network. How often have you heard a "rumor" from the teachers' grapevine about a major (and highly confidential) decision at the district office level, and two weeks later it turned out to be true? The communication network is a complex system through which information is transmitted and interpreted throughout the organization. It represents a hierarchy and circulates the "truth" by which people are judged. People talk! So, how can you use that fact to your advantage?

There are various roles within the communication network. Each has value in keeping you, and everyone else, informed. By consciously identifying these people in the organization, the principal can begin to shape the culture of the school.

1. *Storytellers:* The values and beliefs of people within an organization are reinforced through stories about people and events. Stories send messages, both positive and negative, about the history of the organization and the way things are done. Stories have a profound impact on the people within the organization and on their beliefs about their own or the organization's effectiveness. The storytellers have a unique role in that they interpret what goes on in the organization and

transmit that interpretation through stories to reinforce cultural beliefs, both positive and negative. They can transmit valuable information to the principal about the culture of the organization, and provide a "weather vane" as the reform initiative progresses.

2. *Spies:* These are the individuals who know everything about everybody, and constantly gather information about what is happening within the organization. It is important for them to be "in the know" before everyone else. If someone has concerns about a particular issue, the spy will know who, what, and why. This person will sometimes drop by just to give the principal a "heads up."

3. *Priests/Priestesses:* Within every organization, there are individuals who guard the cultural values. Highly respected by the members of the organization, they are often consulted by others to ensure their actions are consistent with the values of the school culture. They are sometimes perceived as negative because they bring up all the reasons something cannot be done (if it goes against the current beliefs and values of the school culture). Once a principal has identified the priests and priestesses, it would be prudent to ensure at least one of these individuals is on the planning and implementation committees.

4. *Whisperers:* Sometimes described as the "unseen powers behind the throne," these individuals provide specific information about what will work or not, and why.

5. *Cabals:* Cabals refer to groups of two or more individuals who join forces around a common purpose. Cabals can be positive or negative, depending on the purpose that brings the individuals together. They may be the two or three teachers who step forward to take a leadership role in developing and implementing a piece of the reform initiative. They could also be made up of the saboteurs of the process.

Rites and Rituals

Every organization, whether it is religious, political, or social, has a set of structured, predictable activities and daily events (rituals) that reflect "the way we do things around here." Think of the various processes and procedures instituted at your school: attendance procedures, discipline policies and procedures, employee hiring procedures, evaluation processes, student activities such as assemblies, new student orientation, parents' night, college information night, and athletics. These rituals are reflective of the core values and beliefs of the organization. They lend value to the organization by providing

clarity, a common identity, and a sense of security to the stakeholders about "the way we do things around here."

Rites, on the other hand, provide the vehicle for celebrating what is important to individuals within the organization. Some examples of rites include student of the month, teacher of the year, new faculty luncheons, homecoming, report cards, special athletic or yearbook assemblies, and graduation. In considering the culture of your school, you might ask yourself, "Do we have ways to celebrate improved student achievement for all students, or do we only celebrate the achievement of those who are academically already at the top?"

Effective principals retain ceremonies and rituals that support the reform effort, and begin to create new ceremonies and rituals as well. For example, rather than recognize only honor roll students at an honors assembly, the principal might incorporate recognition awards from each academic department for most improved student performance within those subject areas. Over time, this becomes an established part of the school culture. Thus, the principal begins the process of shaping the culture of the school to align with a shared vision around improving student achievement.

Lore and Myths

The culture of any organization is transmitted through stories about "the way we do things around here." They provide the historical context of the school culture. There are stories about the school as the football powerhouse that won the state championship back in 1985, the nationally ranked music program, and the medical career academy that sends 95% of its students to college or university programs. How often have you heard someone say, "But we've *always* done it that way;" "If it ain't broke, don't fix it;" or, "We tried that 15 years ago. It didn't work then and it won't work now." These statements are often accompanied by stories that support the speaker's position, for example, the bell schedule that allows teachers to socialize and/or collaborate during the single lunch period, but resulted in a very large number of students being tardy for their 4th-period classes. Or how the teachers voted on a tardy lockout policy that resulted in a reduction in interruptions during instructional time, but caused an unacceptable number of students to miss critical instruction. Another example might be how the school tried block scheduling in years past but discontinued it because the teachers had difficulty keeping the students' attention while they lectured for 90 minutes straight.

Knowing that stories are an essential and valued component of the organizational culture, principals can begin to reshape the culture of the school by developing and telling stories about staff, students, school organizations, data, and projects to illustrate shared beliefs and values that support the direction of the reform efforts.

Myths, on the other hand, are beliefs that are deeply embedded within the culture and have evolved to an almost mystical status based on many years of retelling. Myths, by definition, are not based on reality or truth, but support the beliefs of the myth-teller. The belief is often contrary to the assumptions inherent in reform efforts such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. Many of the following myths identified in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology report *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities* (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990, p. 3) prevail in secondary schools today:

- Learning is due to innate abilities, and minorities are simply less capable of educational excellence than whites. (p. 37)
- The situation is hopeless; the problems minority youth face . . . are so overwhelming that society is incapable of providing effective responses. (p. 37)
- Quality education for all is a luxury, since not all jobs presently require creativity and problem-solving skills. (p. 38)
- Education is an expense and not an investment. (p. 38)
- Equity and excellence in education are in conflict. (p. 38)
- All we need are marginal changes. (p. 39)
- Minorities don't care about education. (p. 39)
- The problem will go away. (p. 40)
- Educational success or failure is within the complete control of each individual, and in America anybody can make it. (p. 40)

Effective principals listen to and strive to understand the source of the myths, while clearly articulating those stories that illustrate and support the vision of improving the achievement of all students. A primary role of the principal is to provide a forum for stakeholders to identify and confront myths within the school's culture that impede the ability of all students to make significant academic gains. It is the leadership responsibility of the principal to provide current research, information, and resources to stakeholders involved in the reform process to facilitate the resolution of inherent fears and anxieties, and support the behavioral changes necessary to create new attitudes and beliefs.

Rules, Rewards, and Sanctions

Every organization has an implied set of behavioral expectations, or norms, for its members about "how we do business around here." These rules impact our behavior within the context of the organization. Members of an organization either reward or sanction these behaviors based upon their alignment with the rules/norms of the organization.

Physical Environment

The physical location of classrooms and offices reflects the culture of the school. If you want to make a clerical staff member angry, move the staff member out of his or her office and into a smaller office on the other side of the building. If all the special education classes are in portable classrooms on the far side of campus next to the football stadium, what does that say about the beliefs and values of the school relative to students with disabilities? If the school is sparkling clean or covered with trash and dirt, what does that say about how the staff and students feel about their school? Effective secondary principals pay attention to the physical environment as a visible indicator of the culture of the school.

Research has indicated that if these cultural elements are not addressed, reform efforts will fail. Effective secondary principals consciously identify, incorporate, and use these cultural elements throughout the change process.

What the Research Says About Cultural
Norms That Facilitate School Improvement

The research article *School Context: Bridge or Barrier to Change?* (Boyd, 1992) provides an in-depth review of research findings around school culture. A basic finding of various writers indicates that in order for a change effort to be successful, cultural norms that support the change effort must be in place. The following cultural norms are critical to success:

- A norm of protecting what is important, which is a direct result of having a vision of what is important shared by staff, students, and the community
- The norm of a school's continuous critical inquiry of its strengths and weaknesses as a basis for reform, as well as a willingness to continually adapt, experiment, and reinvent it

- The norm of continuous improvement that ensures that access to information, resources, and technical support will be provided to address any problems or challenges that arise
- The norm of active participation in the decision-making process by those who are directly and indirectly affected by the reform effort (Boyd, p. 9).

During this era of high-stakes accountability in the reform of public schools, secondary principals should systematically address the issue of changing the school culture if it is contrary to the goals set forth in the school's action plan.

Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate the impact of school culture on initiating and implementing reform efforts. The first case study illustrates the actions taken to improve student achievement at an older high school with strong school traditions. The second case study illustrates issues faced by a middle school moving through major shifts in student diversity and the principal's actions to address reform mandates.

MHS   Case Study 1: Working With Strong
Traditional School Culture

Municipal High School

Anna S. was named as principal of Municipal High School the previous year after serving as a co-administrator at a middle school. Seventy years old, Municipal High School is viewed as the flagship school of the district, reflecting strong community traditions and expectations. Many of the mostly white, middle-class faculty have been there for over 25 years and had, in fact, graduated from the school. Their teaching strategies tend to be very traditional, and reflect a belief that all students can learn based on their innate ability or aptitude. Although they believe that it is their responsibility to provide clear and engaging lessons, it is ultimately up to the students to take advantage of the opportunity to learn. If they choose not to learn, the faculty honors that decision. The school culture encompasses strong traditions, high expectations, and a "survival of the fittest" mentality.

Over the years, the demographics of the school have changed from a predominantly white, rural population to a culturally diverse

racial and ethnic student population made up of 48% African Americans, 27% Hispanic students, 20% Caucasians, and 5% other ethnic minorities. The student population also includes 75% of students on free and reduced lunch (thereby qualifying the school for Schoolwide Title I status), 28% in the English Language Learners program, and 25% in special education programs. The school is in its third year as a designated underperforming high school based on AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) factors, specifically, the failure of all subgroups to meet minimal performance levels. The school has a 52% transiency rate. Gang activity and school safety are relevant issues.

Anna was selected for the position due to her belief that all students can learn, as well as the plan that she developed to move the reform agenda forward. However, Anna recognizes that the school has a strong and pervasive culture and tradition of meeting the educational needs of those students who are already motivated, self-disciplined, and college-bound. She initiated some specific strategies to promote the major changes in the school's culture that had to occur to move the reform agenda forward.

Prior to the opening of school, Anna made a point to talk to co-administrators, parents, students, department chairs, secretaries and clerical staff, custodians, security staff, and any teachers who happened to be at the school during the summer. During these conversations, she specifically began to identify the traditions, routines, rules, beliefs, and myths, as well as the priests and priestesses, heroes and heroines, and other key stakeholders at the school.

At the initial meeting of faculty and staff prior to the opening of school, Anna displayed the school's AYP results and clearly articulated her belief that the students could improve their achievement through the institution of a standards-based instructional program, as required by the state and the district. She invited all staff to collaborate in the development of a shared vision and school plan that emphasized the academic achievement of all students. The message of improving the academic achievement of all students and the mandate of improving test scores was also delivered to the staff by the superintendent and a school board member.

During the next two days, all staff members were given an opportunity within departmental groups to review the State Academic Content Standards in language arts and mathematics, and identify those standards that could be addressed within their own content areas. These lists were turned in to Anna, who requested that all teachers incorporate these "common standards" into their own curriculum and specify how they would address them as part of their required goals and objectives for the year.

After issuing a general invitation to all staff members, Anna personally invited key stakeholders to participate on a School Leadership Team, being especially careful to include some of the "priests and priestesses" to bring forth issues related to current traditions and expectations versus the realities of moving the reform agenda forward. She hired an outside coach to facilitate the process. She also invited the school's bargaining unit representative, a district office director, and a school board member to participate in the planning process. The planning committee, composed of teachers, classified staff members, students, parents, and community members, met monthly for 2 to 4 hours over the first year. Initial operating norms were established; outcomes were specified; and a timeline was determined. At the first meeting, stakeholders engaged in an activity to identify their own beliefs and values and the cultural norms of the school. Because of the intensity of the discussion, this initial process took two months to complete. Anna was an active participant in the process and provided parameters within the scope of the state and district mandates.

With ongoing input by staff, students, and parent/community groups, the School Leadership Team created a shared vision statement that formed the basis for a comprehensive school plan. They considered district and schoolwide student performance data, and examined a wide variety of additional data about the school (see Chapter 3, The Single School Plan). They assessed the school's traditions, policies, procedures, programs, and routines that represent the existing cultural reality, and systematically incorporated those that supported the reform agenda.

Recognizing the critical importance of providing necessary support and resources to facilitate a change in the school's culture, Anna recruited four full-time release instructional coaches (English/ Language Arts and Social Studies, Math and Science, Special Populations, and Electives) to provide ongoing support and assistance to departments throughout the reform process. Based on immediate teacher concerns and requests, she also provided additional funds to each teacher for supplies, access to duplicating machines, and Saturday workshops on how to effectively use the newly acquired language arts texts and resource materials.

Anna clearly communicated to the staff the expectation that they teach to the State Academic Standards. This expectation was translated into the professional goals and objectives for each teacher. Evaluative data was collected through the teacher evaluation process outlined in the bargaining unit contract. She initiated a protocol for frequent nonevaluative classroom "drop-ins" by administrators, district office

staff, and peers, with a focus on teaching to the State Academic Standards. Mini workshop sessions that outlined the process and the criteria were made available to all stakeholders participating in the "walk-throughs" (see Chapter 8, Productive Classroom Observations). This action was taken to address the existing cultural norm of teacher isolation and "doing your own thing" in the classroom.

Based on stated school goals and a survey that identified the differentiated learning needs of her faculty, Anna and a group of teacher leaders and instructional coaches developed a professional development plan that was incorporated into the single school plan. This plan provided immediate and long-term professional development opportunities on cultural diversity, teaching to state standards, using assessment data to inform instruction, effective instructional practices, reflective practice, and peer coaching. The plan reflected a comprehensive and sustained professional development effort that included dedicated time for learning conversations, collaborative department meetings around student learning issues based on benchmark data, and three mini-workshop series on topics specific to stated school goals.

At the fourth staff meeting, Anna instituted the first monthly "Teacher of the Month" recognition, with an award certificate, a donated dinner-for-two gift certificate, and positive "testimonials" by staff and students. Nominated by students, parents, and/or staff, honored teachers reflected actions and beliefs that personified the direction of the reform efforts. Teachers were encouraged to share success stories during department meetings and at staff meetings. The "successes" illustrated ways that identified issues/problems were addressed in the classroom. Time was available on the agendas for this to occur in small groups or through individual presentations to the full staff.

It should be noted that Anna's first year was very difficult and time consuming. Many staff members struggled through the initiation of the reform process, feeling overwhelmed by the new information and expectations, and grieving for the loss of the existing school culture. Not all stakeholders willingly participated in the various activities. During the first quarter, there were midnight calls to board members and the superintendent, complaints to the bargaining unit president, and requests for transfers to other schools. Anna happily approved these transfer requests and actively recruited new staff members who expressed the beliefs and values necessary for the reform efforts. She maintained an open communication system with the district and teachers' association leadership, to address anticipated concerns and keep the leadership informed throughout the process. She also spent considerable time building personal relationships with staff, parents,

and students through her open-door policy, as well as her visibility and availability during lunch and passing periods, before and after school, and at key parent, student, and individual meetings with staff. By the end of the first semester, things began to settle down as staff members had a clearer idea of the vision, obtained needed support, and began to see the impact in their own classrooms.

Points to Consider

- Effective principals, co-administrators, and instructional leaders model the values and beliefs that are important to the school, and encourage teachers and students to do the same. These actions result in a clear message to everyone about "what is important." Walk the talk!
- Work collaboratively with teachers, staff, students, and parents to develop a shared vision based on beliefs, values, and historical context. Be prepared for this process to take some time.
- Consider getting an outside facilitator for the development of a vision statement and strategic plan. There is no doubt that conversations during this process will unearth some major differences in stakeholder beliefs and values. This can be messy. Stay the course!
- Acknowledge up front that there will be major differences and conflicts among stakeholders. Discuss and establish norms to set safe parameters for the conversations.
- Use storytelling at staff meetings, committee meetings, community forums, and parent meetings to spotlight shared values and beliefs.
- Create new heroes and heroines by telling stories about their "heroic" accomplishments, adventures, and activities.
- Invite the priests and priestesses to participate in the decision-making process, thereby giving them the opportunity to interpret new initiatives through the belief systems of the organization.
- Whenever possible, align new ideas with the historical record of "what works here."
- Develop a cultural norm of shared decision making. This will require the principal to be flexible with his or her agenda within the constraints of current mandates.
- Recruit, retain, and reward staff members who share the beliefs, values, and behaviors required to move the reform agenda forward.

- Be prepared for conflict, opposition, and sabotage; change cannot happen without it! Don't take things personally (and that's not always easy to do!).
- Develop and maintain strong communication links with the district and bargaining unit leadership. This will assist in identifying potential problems or issues up front, provide accurate information to counter the whisperers who try to sabotage your efforts, and generally facilitate the planning and implementation process.

GMS Case Study 2: Working With a Diversifying Student Body

Greenview Middle School

Mary, a white, former math teacher at the school, is beginning her first year as principal of Greenview Middle School following three years as a co-administrator. Greenview Middle School is comprised of approximately 1200 seventh- and eighth-grade students. The student population is made up of 40% Caucasian, 35% Hispanic, 10% Asian, 10% African-American, and 5% other ethnic students. Ten percent of the students are enrolled in special education classes and 35% of the students are Limited English Proficient. The school is a designated Schoolwide Title I school due to the large percentage of students in the free and reduced lunch program, and is in its third year as a designated program improvement school based on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) results. Recently, the school was designated as an Unsafe School through NCLB (*No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001) due to its excessive number of expulsions.

Ten years old, the school is made up of a cadre of veteran white, middle-class faculty members who tend to be traditional in their teaching strategies; many of them have been passed over for teaching assignments at the high school. The faculty expresses frustration in dealing with student behaviors that reflect the racial and ethnic changes in the student population and frequently refers students to the vice principal for actions such as "rolling their eyes." As a vice principal, Mary supported teachers in maintaining a strong culture of student discipline, resulting in the largest number of school expulsions in the county during the previous year.

The faculty holds a general belief that all students can learn and demonstrate some growth based upon their innate ability or aptitudes and effort. The faculty provides multiple opportunities for

students to learn. Although students are encouraged to learn, whether they do or not is dependent upon external factors such as degree of parent support, socioeconomic status, and internal motivation, which are considered beyond the control of the faculty.

Because Mary is so efficient and task oriented, she completed the school plan during the summer prior to the beginning of school and presented it to the faculty at the beginning of the year. She did not elicit input during the writing of the plan, depending solely on her firsthand knowledge of the staff and school issues as well as the culture of the school. The plan was quite directive and included specific goals, strategies, and performance indicators, along with timelines for implementation. Mary decided to retain full responsibility for plan implementation monitoring since she was not confident that the staff was capable of getting the job done. Every teacher was required to incorporate the objectives, activities, and timelines into his or her annual "goals and objectives" document.

Almost immediately, Mary began receiving complaints from the faculty, parents, students, and some community members about changes she had incorporated into the plan and initiated. Many teachers refused to attend staff development sessions designed to change their instructional practices, as well as develop knowledge and skills to address the diverse student population, citing the teachers' contract language. In the meantime, stories began to circulate within the school, the district, and in the surrounding community of the "disastrous" changes that threatened the sacred traditions of the school and were being imposed from above. By the end of the first semester, Mary's doctor had doubled her blood pressure medication and the superintendent was considering putting her on an assistance plan.

Points to Consider

- Don't assume that you alone know the beliefs, values, assumptions, and cultural priorities of the school. *Including all stakeholders in the process is essential.*
- Changing the culture of an organization is a journey, not an end product. It is *the* most difficult part of change. Be patient but persistent.
- Developing, monitoring, and revising the plan is an ongoing, systematic process; it is part of the journey! Don't think you are finished when the plan is developed.
- Communication systems can work for you or against you, depending on how you utilize them (or not!).

Summary

The culture of an organization is represented by the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the people in the organization, and is reflected in "how we do things around here." Establishing a vision for school reform is the first step in the long and challenging journey of the reform process. This is particularly necessary if the existing culture and norms of the school are contrary to the mission of educational reform. Identifying the key members of the communication network and analyzing the various cultural elements, such as the stories, reward and sanction system, and existing rites and rituals, will provide a starting point in initiating and facilitating behavior changes that will ultimately result in changes in beliefs and values of stakeholders. This process requires strong leadership and persistence by the instructional leaders of the school.

Application Activity

1. Thinking about your own staff, who are the individuals that might fall within each of the categories of the Communication Network?

2. What are some of the rites and rituals at your school that demonstrate what is important to people within the organization?

3. What are some of the artifacts from your school that would provide indicators of the school culture?

4. What are some basic operational norms or agreements for staff behavior that you would like to have in place at your school?