

# ***SCHOOL CULTURE RECHARGED***

***STRATEGIES TO ENERGIZE  
YOUR STAFF AND  
CULTURE***

***STEVE GRUENERT  
& TODD WHITAKER***



# ***SCHOOL CULTURE RECHARGED***

|                                                                        |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Introduction.....                                                      | vii |
| 1. Exploring the People–Culture Dynamic.....                           | 1   |
| 2. Hacking Culture to Recharge Schools.....                            | 7   |
| 3. Building an Intentional Culture .....                               | 19  |
| 4. Harnessing Culture to Energize and Enrich People.....               | 29  |
| 5. Using Culture to Enhance Teaching.....                              | 45  |
| 6. Empowering Student Voices .....                                     | 57  |
| 7. Understanding the Layers of Culture .....                           | 65  |
| 8. Disrupting the Culture–People Balance.....                          | 77  |
| 9. Settling the Blame: It’s Never Policies or Programs .....           | 91  |
| 10. Solving Problems with Professional<br>Learning Communities.....    | 103 |
| 11. Leading by the Numbers.....                                        | 113 |
| 12. Developing New Organizational Habits .....                         | 129 |
| 13. Allowing Culture to Manage.....                                    | 139 |
| 14. Cultivating Culture to Improve Job Satisfaction<br>and Morale..... | 157 |
| 15. Developing a Culture Where Teaching Is<br>Cool Again .....         | 171 |
| 16. Concluding Thoughts.....                                           | 177 |
| References .....                                                       | 183 |
| Index .....                                                            | 185 |
| About the Authors .....                                                | 189 |

# ***INTRODUCTION***

---

**I**n our first book, *School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It* (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015), we tried to make school culture relevant as well as accessible. In other words, we tried to help readers understand what it is, how it might influence teacher behaviors, and how leaders might begin to shape a new culture if the one they have is not working well.

The response to *School Culture Rewired* has been incredible. The degree to which educators understand and care about the culture of their schools and organizations has been awe-inspiring. We have had the pleasure to connect with many readers in person, at presentations around the world, and on social media (Twitter @SteveGruenert and @ToddWhitaker); and, as you will find out in this book, some of you have turned school culture change into a viral phenomenon (#CelebrateMonday).

In this book we try to present a more practical application of how school leaders might use (rather than attack) their cultures to improve their schools and people. We do not want you to just understand the concept; we want you to harness the power of culture and the power of people so that you can develop teachers and schools that are better than ever before.

then the culture will provide security. Day after day, the same thing occurs. This is what culture is supposed to do—it is kind of a manager.

Culture is a powerful force because the rules are not written down. The rules are imprinted into our souls as we pledge allegiance to the group, in this case, our schools. It's not a cult, but our school is a professional religion and we believe *it can be used to improve schools*. In other words, we are not just agreeing with previous authors that you need to be aware of your school's culture before making changes, we are suggesting that you let the culture be the catalyst in those changes.

## **Your School Five Years Ago— and Five Years from Now**

When we speak of a school's vision, most people imagine five years into the future. That would mean you are currently living the vision that was developed five years ago. If we were to walk around your school taking photographs, interviewing people, maybe even looking at some student data, and were to show these artifacts to the people in the past, would they feel good about the future? Would you? What mental pictures (this is where the term *vision* comes from) do you have of your school five years from now? If we were able to provide artifacts from the future, what would you hope they would look like?

If a vision is something that exists in people's minds, then that vision will be vulnerable to the culture, because culture is also found in our minds. The future will always be influenced by the past, as expressed in the culture; we can't start at zero each day. The culture is a voting member of every steering committee—we can hear its voice daily.

## How Culture Overpowers Diverse Beliefs

One potential value of using groups is to bring diversity of thought into problem solving. Rather than have one person sit alone and attempt to think of solutions, a collaborative culture brings a group of people together to gain multiple perspectives. Culture, however, often kills diversity. The objective of culture is to converge the new people's values and beliefs toward those of its members. Any diverse perspective will need to be modified, if not deleted, so the holder of these beliefs can maintain good standing in the group. This is the "melting pot" effect: the more time I spend with you, the more I become like you. Imagine a midwesterner spending six months in New York City or New Orleans. A speaker of the local dialect will recognize the midwesterner when he first arrives with comments like "You're not from around here, are you?" After a few months, the visitor will begin to take on qualities of the locals to the point that when he returns home he will be confronted with some admonishment about how he speaks. It happens with food, clothing, language, and many other habits of life, as well—even our dispositions toward waiting in line. The visitor or a new person tends to assimilate and become more like those people in the culture surrounding him than he influences the group. Over time, collaboration builds a "group think" mentality.

This is what cultures do. They redefine what it means to be "normal around here." They reward fitting in; they don't care much for outliers. Given this cultural convergence theory, what can you in your school leader role do as you try to improve your school? Is this a dynamic you are stuck with and need to fight, or is there a way you can use available cultural forces to your advantage?

Cultures need balance. To maintain predictability, each person needs to behave according to his or her own internal script. In your school, do one or two people consistently try to be the comic? Is there always a “devil’s advocate” who responds to every new idea? Do the same people seem to be the champions of new concepts, living on the fringe of risk taking? Is there someone who seems to oppose everything, as well as a few who agree to everything?

Here is what we mean by balance: If a culture has three weak teachers, then that culture, as it currently exists, may *need* three weak teachers. To maintain its current identity, which has been sanctified through time, the culture has three roles that need to be filled by teachers who are consistently negative, ineffective, or apathetic (or however you decide to define “weak”). If you were able to remove these teachers or if they were to leave voluntarily, understand that the roles may still persist, waiting to be filled according to the existing culture. If the new people you hire to replace these three weak teachers are put into the same positions, situations, schedules, and proximity to others, chances are they will find and fill those roles. Others will expect them to do so, and doing so may be the easiest way for the new members to fit into the organization. We cannot simply kill off Darth Vader and expect the *Star Wars* series to continue. We need to find a new person to take the role of the antagonist.

way in which students passed through the hallways between classrooms was not working well, so the schools changed it. Changes like these, as well as to the math curriculum, were continually addressed. Imagine working at a school where, whenever people find something not working, they fix it. In some schools, getting better is not an option; it is expected.

Could you make a list of the little things at your school that you wish could be fixed tomorrow? Would any of these be on the list?

- Bus drop-off and pick-up procedures
- Lunch periods
- Announcements
- Assemblies
- Open house

Spend a few minutes brainstorming those aspects of your school that seem to annoy or frustrate people, and then ask, “If we change it, who would be upset?” In other words, acknowledge the possibility that the reason we do what we do is usually because it is what we have always done in the past. Someone in the past decided it was a good idea, and so it became a routine. Chances are that person is gone and the routine needs to be modified, if not stopped. Ask, who is protecting these things that make our day at school miserable at times? What do those people have to lose if a change is made? Chances are a thousand other school leaders have asked about this issue, some of them have solved it, and some of them check Twitter and other social media sites every day in search of a solution.

---

We can get caught up in things  
that do not matter and that  
muddy the water.

---

© Hawker Brownlow Education

So what? If there is a space between culture and climate, and this space is equal to the concept of dispositions, what does it mean to those of us hoping to create a new school culture?

## Using Rituals and Routines as Leverage Points

Dispositions are a set of habits. Organizational habits are rituals and routines. In Figure 12.1, we present a chart that outlines the differences between climate and culture. And, in the following list, we give ideas about rituals and routines that might represent leverage points that you can use to help positively affect the climate and culture in your school.

- Adding donuts to a meeting to help make attendees feel appreciated
- Greeting others with a smile can be contagious
- Making decisions as a group, not announcing predictable top-down demands
- Announcing special faculty/staff parking for employee(s) of the month
- Assigning random seats at faculty meetings to invite potential for new friends
- Making a point to focus on, post, and celebrate student work throughout the building
- Adjusting the local “speed limit” relative to how we work
- Celebrating testing as a chance to show what is learned, instead of as a distraction from teaching and learning
- Building risk taking into daily school life
- Being positive role models, because what others see us do is what they think we value most

**FIG 12.1** Some Differences Between Climate and Culture

| Culture . . .                                            | Climate . . .                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| . . . is the group's personality.                        | . . . is the group's attitude.                                       |
| . . . gives Mondays permission to be miserable.          | . . . differs from Monday to Friday, February to May.                |
| . . . provides for a limited way of thinking.            | . . . creates a state of mind.                                       |
| . . . takes years to evolve.                             | . . . is flexible, easy to change.                                   |
| . . . is based on values and beliefs.                    | . . . is based on perceptions.                                       |
| . . . can't be felt, even by group members.              | . . . can be felt when you enter a room.                             |
| . . . is part of us.                                     | . . . surrounds us.                                                  |
| . . . is "the way we do things around here."             | . . . is "the way we feel around here."                              |
| . . . has allies and enemies.                            | . . . is a group's response to a situation.                          |
| . . . determines whether or not improvement is possible. | . . . is the first thing that improves when positive change is made. |
| . . . is in your head.                                   | . . . is in your head.                                               |

Source: Adapted from *School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It* (p. 10), by S. Gruenert and T. Whitaker, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright © 2015 by ASCD. Adapted with permission.

Remember that the point at which something moves from being a temporary change (climate) to a more permanent status (culture) is seldom obvious to those who are doing it. But if we do make a temporary change, such as being friendly or celebrating Monday, and we never revert to the earlier behavior, the new behavior does become part of the culture. We are simply not sure of the start date. So, with that in mind, what does the time between temporary and permanent look like? How do we know when a new ritual or routine is beginning to stick (Heath & Heath, 2007)?