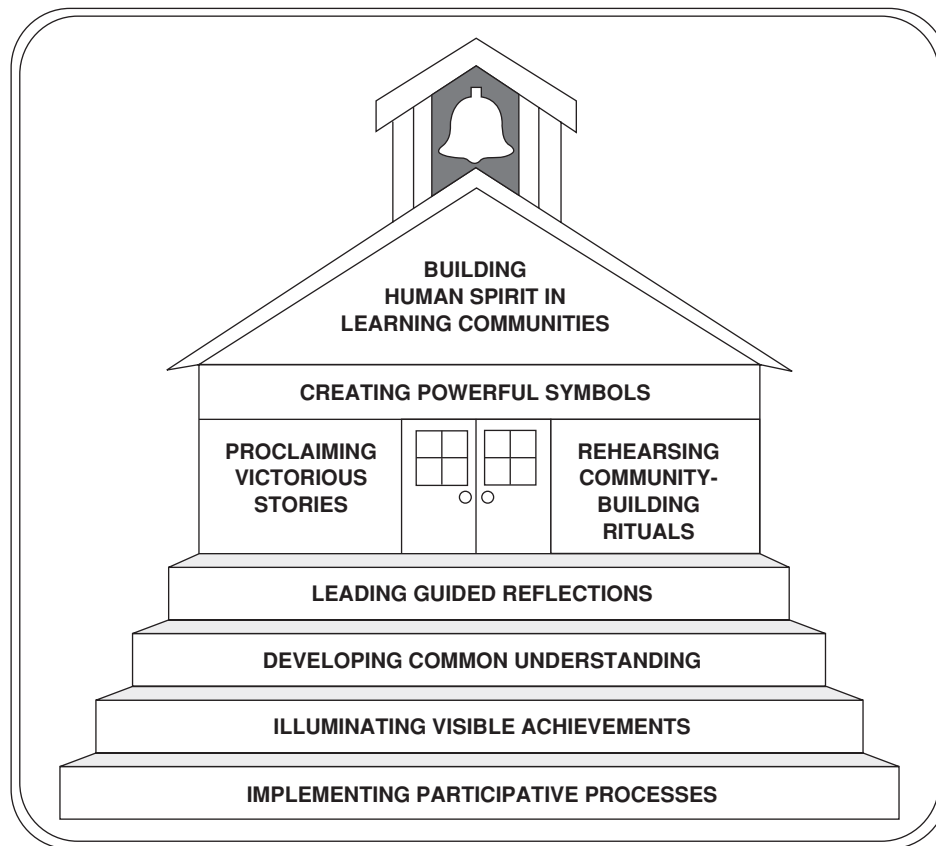


Introduction



Knitting the elements of culture into an artistic tapestry is like creating a word from the letters of the alphabet. Juxtaposed with one another the letters form a meaningful expression, just as combining the elements of culture create[s] a cohesive school identity.

— Terrence E. Deal and Kent Peterson, 1999,
Shaping School Culture (p. 69)

An elementary school had a faculty that worked well together for many years. When a new elementary school opened in the district, several of this school's faculty were reassigned to teach at the new school. The remaining faculty seemed to be in shock. Certainly, they had lost a lot of their motivation. At the beginning of a strategic planning and implementation workshop, the mood was heavy. Participation was labored at first. As people began to talk together, listen to each other's continued hopes for their school, and make plans for the future, the climate changed. One sign of that was the active participation of a person everyone reported never talked out loud in meetings.

As a result of their planning, school teams were created that continued to meet regularly to implement the plans they had made. The principal met faithfully with the teams to encourage their work. A coordinating team met regularly to make sure that teams were on target with their plans. As the year progressed, their morale rose sharply and successes replaced their original mood of despair with one of hope and inspiration.

Some of the factors that contributed to this turnaround in morale were the participation of the entire faculty in planning and implementation, the targeting and accomplishment of visible achievements, the common understanding that arose out of the planning time together, and the bonding power of the reflective conversations held during the planning time. In addition, the principal continually used her symbolic power in positive and supportive ways.

■ PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

School change is complicated. Many books have given many clues on how to affect change in a school. These have offered significant clues for encouraging and enhancing school change. This book shares tools and experiences to help school leaders impact the school culture and build spirit across the whole school's community of learners. These tools are specifically designed to help raise morale and build spirit. It goes without saying that teachers can use many of these tools in their classrooms.

This book may be read cover to cover or explored wherever interest leads the reader. It encourages the reader to discover where particular interests are and then delve into that part of the book.

■ OUR TIMES

Reforming and recreating schools is a major theme of our times. "Reforms that bring new technologies or higher standards won't succeed without being embedded in supportive, spirit-filled cultures. Schools won't become what students deserve until cultural patterns and ways are shaped to support learning" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 137). Some of the directions for reform proposed today seem to focus on external solutions. Policies and mandates are imposed from the outside. More assessments are proposed (Deal & Peterson, 1999, pp. xi-xii).

The purpose of this book is not to suggest that any of these external solutions are mistaken. Rather, it is to offer that taken alone these external

solutions will not work, because no real improvement can occur without significant support from within the school culture. Furthermore, for Deal and Peterson (1999, p. xii) the school culture is integral for increasing student learning and achievement.

In the midst of these challenging times, it is tempting to offer clear-cut answers; that is not the purpose of this book. Hopefully, this book shines some light on areas that assist our work in schools such as increasing levels of participation in the school community, creating common understandings of what the school hopes to accomplish, implementing visible achievements, and expanding the power of stories, rituals, and symbols. “We need new strategies to work within a world where strangeness becomes stranger over time and where no explanation maintains its usefulness for long” (Eoyang, 1997, p. 3). Unless we focus attention on enlivening the spirit and on awakening morale, no amount of reform or mandate or policy or assessment will totally solve the challenges we face today in education. Education once again needs to be a source of inspiration, motivation, and aspiration.

OUR CHALLENGE ■

To balance the huge effort of focusing on the externals—that is outcomes, mandates, and assessments—there needs to be a focus on the internal (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. xi). The world is changing fast. Our students are different from students of even 15 or 20 years ago. Technology has leaped forward, and many students have made the leap. Diversity has transformed the makeup of our schools. Often the change has happened so fast that schools are trying to figure out how to best respond. In many ways the institutional structure of many of our educational facilities has become dreadfully outdated.

The challenge education faces in the midst of increasing external pressure and accountability is to look deep within the entire school system—indeed, the entire school culture—and deal with those forces that allow negativity, fragmentation, and despair to fester. Senge (1990) is helpful for us here:

The systems perspective tells us that we must look beyond individual mistakes or bad luck to understand important problems. We must look beyond personalities and events. We must look into the underlying structures which shape individual actions and create the conditions where types of events become likely. (pp. 42–43)

The issue is not people; that is, it is not the teachers nor the students nor the administration. The issue is not the curriculum. The issue is not even the external mandates and pushes for accountability. The issue is not leadership style or method of decision making. And yet all of these are important and need to be addressed in every school. The issue is what lies underneath all of that in the makeup of the school culture.

Fortunately, there are ways to discern what the underlying environment and culture are. Furthermore, much can be done to transform negativity, fragmentation, and despair.

The reason that structural explanations are so important is that only they address the underlying causes of behavior at a level that

patterns of behavior can be changed. Structure produces behavior, and changing underlying structures can produce different patterns of behavior. In this sense, structural explanations are inherently generative. Moreover, since structure in human systems includes the “operating policies” of the decision makers in the system, redesigning our own decision making redesigns the system structure. (Senge, 1990, p. 53)

A focus on the underlying school culture can actually alter patterns of behavior. Consequently, unlike the difficulty of meeting external mandates and new forms of accountability, the faculty and the administration can totally control many aspects of the school culture. The tools that can enable impacting the school culture are at the heart of this book. Deal and Peterson (1999, p. 127) remind us that this is no easy task. Nevertheless, it is a possible task, because the human beings that make up the culture and the structures of a school are right there in the school.

The nature of structure in human systems is subtle because we are part of the structure. This means that we often have the power to alter structures within which we are operating. However, more often than not, we do not perceive that power. (Senge, 1990, p. 44)

When appropriate time and attention are given to the school environment and culture, the impossible and overwhelming become possible and manageable. This can happen because a new perspective is born. A new energy is tapped.

■ A WORD ABOUT CULTURE

What is it that we are calling culture or, in our case, school culture? As we said earlier, it is invisible—yet its manifestations are very visible and palpable in a school. The culture of a school is sensed immediately upon entering the school.

“We believe the term *culture* provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school’s own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 2).

The key in what Deal and Peterson are suggesting is that whatever we are referring to with the term *culture* is omnipresent. It is underneath and behind all that goes on in the life of a school. It is the real source of the “unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations.” This is why it needs attention. Left uncared for it can evolve into that which breeds negativity, fragmentation, and despair. It is culture that underlies all that goes on in school and directly affects beliefs as well as teacher and student behaviors (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 3).

School culture forms the beliefs and behaviors of the school’s everyday life. No matter what external rules and expectations are prevalent, unless culture is transformed, little that is positive and affirming can survive. The underlying culture impacts how teachers, students, staff, support personnel think, act, and feel as they work day in and day out in the school (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 4).

Toxic Cultures

Deal and Peterson (1999) analyzed the presence of “toxic cultures”; their thinking on this is organized into chart form in Table 0.1.

Four primary characteristics of toxic cultures stand out. The first is the prevalence of negative values. This does not mean that a school never talks about or deals with negative issues. It does mean that the danger is that negative values and beliefs become the predominant ones. When negative issues overwhelm the possibility of any solution, the possibility of toxic culture dramatically increases.

Fragmentation refers to the divisions among faculty and staff that have become more operational than the whole community. Not all smaller groups are unhelpful. Notice that the key concern is with the smaller groups that have become negative in their influence.

The third characteristic of toxic cultures is the presence of destructive acts. It is one thing for people to keep negative values and beliefs to themselves. It is even different if they are only talked about. Toxic cultures arise with intentional acts whose purpose, conscious or unconscious, is out to tear down.

The final characteristic is fractured spirit. When spirit is fractured, there is little positive underlying glue holding the school community together. That is, people—teachers, students, and administrators—are just going through the motions.

These characteristics show up concretely in the life of the school. When a focus on negative values shows up, negative values are in total control. This shows up in people who find it impossible to imagine a positive outcome. This shows up in people who have lost their vision of what

Table 0.1 Toxic Cultures

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Elements</i>	<i>Antidotes</i>
Prevalence of negative values	Control by negative values and beliefs	Confront head on.
Fragmentation	Negative groups and cliques	Support positive cultural elements and subgroups.
Destructive acts	Negative roles: Saboteurs Pessimists Prima donnas Deadwood Martyrs	Recruit, select, and retain effective positive staff.
Fractured spirit	Meaningless rituals and traditions	Create new stories of success, renewal, and accomplishment.

Adapted from Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. (1999). *Shaping school culture* (pp. 118–129). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

education and school can be. This shows up in people who are only out for the paycheck or the good grade.

Fragmentation shows up with the presence of a myriad of strong, overpowering small groups or cliques. Cliques that are really out to foster positive growth and achievement in the life of a school are valuable. Such cliques put the good of the whole school ahead of their own specific hopes and agendas. Cliques that only support their own agendas result in a harmful fragmentation that ends up frustrating the well-meaning efforts of positive groups.

There are individuals and groups who move beyond negative beliefs to concrete, specific destructive acts. They not only disagree but are out to derail any healthy and positive direction. These can be the overt saboteurs, the negative storytellers, those who only want the spotlight, and those who depend on others to pull the weight.

Finally, the fractured spirit manifests itself in lifeless school community events. Over and over again, people carry out just more of the same. An event occurs only because it has happened every year for the last 50 years. The energy that created the tradition or the event in the first place has long since past. Another manifestation of the fractured spirit is the burned-out teacher or student. The pressure has become overwhelming. Life has been snuffed out.

The antidotes are very much on target. They are excellent antidotes regardless of the characteristic or element a school is dealing with. It is up to the school leaders to decide which antidote best meets the needs of a particular situation.

The first antidote is to confront negative values and beliefs head on. Without naming people, it is still possible to name the negative value and belief and to describe how it shows up. One can offer alternative positive values and beliefs that will characterize the school's culture from then on. This can be done forcefully and does not need to convey judgment of individuals.

Another effective antidote is to spend the bulk of available energy supporting those individuals and groups who embody constructive positive beliefs and actions. Instead of battling the negative forces, strengthen the positive ones and watch what happens. As positive victories amass, the negative will be forced to retreat.

A related antidote has to do with bringing more and more constructive and positive staff on board. The flip side, of course, is to encourage the negative, destructive staff to find other places of employment. Sometimes that can be the most helpful strategy for helping them change. The presence of new people will energize those faithful, positive staff members who have been working so hard to bring success and improvement.

Finally, the last antidote is one that much space in this book is used to develop. Briefly, it involves creating and highlighting great new stories of what is working and what is bringing about success. Stories and artifacts that demonstrate victories do wonders to unify the spirit of the entire school community. They help to remind everyone why they chose to become educators in the first place, remind the community why school is such an essential part of any community, and communicate success to students and the community.

A WORD ABOUT SPIRIT ■

My intent in these following sections is to demystify this word *spirit* and thereby make it a more approachable word. It is a word that needs to be recovered if we are to bring life into our educational institutions.

Culture and Spirit

Harrison Owen says

“Culture is the dynamic field within which Spirit is shaped, formed and directed” (Owen, 1987, p. 121).

“Culture is the dynamic field within which the spirit of man assumes its shape and gets its job done” (Adams, 1986, p. 115).

The previous section talked about culture and its role in setting the tone, the milieu, the atmosphere of a school. Owen’s words liken culture to a “dynamic field.” It is this dynamic field that allows spirit to operate, to grow, to form, and to work. From this it becomes apparent that culture invites, forms, and encourages the presence of spirit. As indicated previously, toxic cultures diminish or extinguish spirit. Healthy cultures encourage and feed spirit. When that happens, the spirit can attend to its task of enlivening and deepening the human enterprise.

In the powerful, well-formed cultures, the spirit is strong, and tasks are accomplished with dispatch. But when the culture (dynamic field) becomes weak, flaccid, and incoherent, the spirit loses its intention and direction. So if our intention is to ensure that the spirit of a particular organization is adequate to the task at hand, and to those tasks that may lie just over the horizon, our area of operation will be the culture of the organization. (Adams, 1986, p. 115)

For Owen, when one is concerned about spirit in an organization, one needs to focus on the organization’s culture. Only by turning one’s attention to the culture can one revive the spirit. It would seem from this that more specific job descriptions, stronger accountability, even good skills training (all of which are needed and important) will not complete the job without also strengthening the healthy culture of an organization. How does one begin? Where does a school team start? According to Allen and Kraft, “The cultural approach means looking beyond individual causes and solutions to the social factors that influence us and to make use of those factors to create change” (Adams, 1984, p. 37). Looking at the culture means looking at the pieces that make up the culture—its social interactions; its knowledge and beliefs; its style of operating, its stories, formal and informal; its ceremonies and rites; and its key visual symbols.

Spirit as Energy, Force, and Vitality

One can find spirit everywhere, in all individuals and in all groups and organizations. Bolman and Deal (1995, p. 20) suggest that spirit is the

“internal force that sustains meaning and hope.” James A. Ritscher writes, “The spirit of an organization is its heart, its vital nature. Spirit is a sense of vitality, energy, vision, and purpose. All organizations have spirit, but in some cases it is dull and tarnished” (Adams, 1986, p. 62). Perhaps we begin to get a glimpse of what these writers are talking about when we recall comments like, “That was a spirited discussion we had this morning.” In that context we might be talking about a lively discussion, a vibrant discussion, a discussion with much vitality. Whatever force creates a sense of drive, energy, and aliveness is the force these writers are pointing to with the word *spirit*.

Owen reminds us that spirit has often been connected with breath or wind. In this way spirit is “that vital energy or force that underlies all physical reality.” Likewise, then, the underlying reality of all organizations is “spirit and flow.” If this is true, then one can easily ascertain that the task of school leadership teams is to “focus the spirit and enhance its power,” and direct the flow and spirit toward the attainment of the school’s mission and objectives (Adams, 1986, p. 113).

While we have avoided using words like spirit and spirituality in the context of education, it is time to see that unless we find appropriate ways to understand these dynamics, learning communities will become lifeless and devoid of values. Without discovering appropriate ways to bring spirit back into educational institutions, administrators, teachers, and students will continue to lose motivation and hope. “Spirit and faith are the core of human life. Without them, you lose your way. You live without zest. You go through the motions, but there’s no passion” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 20). When this happens, administration, teachers, and students become meaningless to each other. Everyone begins to feel they are playing an inauthentic game. With spirit present, on the other hand, school becomes an exciting place to work and to learn. With spirit present, school becomes a place of hope for all.

Spirit Versus Religion

There is obviously a danger when bringing such words as spirit and soul into this book about education and schools. Public schools have been established to be free of a specific religion, doctrine, church, temple, or mosque. People are rightfully distressed when those boundaries are crossed in public education.

Ritscher comes to the rescue here with helpful clarity:

When I use the word spiritual, I am not referring to religion. A religion is an organization that professes to provide spiritual experiences to groups of people. Spirituality, however, is more an individual matter; it does not rely on an external organization. Rather, spirituality is an experience of depth in life; it is living life with heart rather than superficiality. For some, spirituality involves the belief in a god. For others, it takes a different form. In any case, spirituality is the awareness that there is something more to life than just our narrow, ego-oriented view of it. (Adams, 1986, p. 61)

Strengthening the spirit has to do with experiencing the depth in life, going beneath surface realities to heartfelt core realities. Howard Gardner lately has talked a great deal about enabling schools to help students discern “the true, the beautiful, and the good” (Gardner, 2000, p. 143). This is all distinct from any religious doctrine or religious institutions. Yet in our fear of trespassing, often education has steered away from any of the above. When we do that, we rob our students of the opportunity to explore their own depths and to develop their own strong spirits. When we do that, we are abdicating to the loudest commercial market forces to shape our students’ depths. “What has escaped us is a deep understanding of the spirit, purpose, and meaning of the human experience” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 8).

Feeding the Spirit

As with any living thing, without nourishment, without encouragement the human spirit withers, goes dormant, or perhaps even dies. So one of our challenges is how to feed the human spirit, how to help it grow into health and strength. In their book *Leading with Soul*, Bolman and Deal say the spirit is fed by offering people “gifts from the heart,” which inculcate meaning, depth, and passion (1995, p. 12).

If our schools can’t do this, if our leaders can’t bring spirit to life, then we will find our schools faltering under the pressure of this trend and that fad (Adams, 1986, p. 62). Only schools strong in spirit will have the drive and strength to transform themselves into schools meeting the needs of this twenty-first century. The spirit resources are plentiful in our schools. These resources only need attention and focus. Owen (1987) challenges us here: “Dealing with Spirit is not just nice, it is essential. For Spirit may be the only thing we have left” (p. 2).

STRUCTURE OF EACH ACTIVITY ■

At the end of the chapters in this book are activities, each of which begins with a general description of what the activity is and continues with a step-by-step outline of the method for carrying out the activity. An example follows to clarify exactly how the activity can be used. Finally, the activity concludes with a “metacognitive insight.” Metacognitive here means a reflective or deeper interpretation of the activity itself. Often additional hints are given to enable the practitioner to carry out the activity successfully.

TEMPLATES ■

Many of the activities use a form to help guide the practitioner. This form is often found in the examples filled out as one might use it. In the back of the book, blanks of many of these forms are included. It is the hope that practitioners will find these blanks useful in implementing these activities in their schools.