Quality Education News

Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Does your school need a culture re-boot?

The recent Australian cricket team tour to South Africa was memorable for different reasons. One positive was (if you're a South African), winning the Test series 3-1. A negative was the ball-tampering incident in the Cape Town match. After the match, cricket commentators, players and supporters stated that the incident wasn't in the spirit of the game.

Shane Warne, a former Australian cricketer himself, observed that the incident was totally contrary to the culture of how his country played the game. He stated that there needed to be a revisit by Cricket Australia on how to ensure that his country played the game, "hard but fair." There needed to be a cultural re-boot of Australian cricket.

Just as a cricket team has its' own distinct cultural identity, so does a school. Every school does similar things such as teach children but every school does it uniquely. The culture of the school defines its' uniqueness.

What is "school culture"? A common way to describe it is, "the way we do things here."

A school culture develops through the years. What the founding staff members and children did often become the traditions of the school. Over time, a number of written and unwritten rules become the accepted ways to behave both in and outside the classroom. The older the school, the more likely the culture becomes entrenched.

A single example is the school uniform. There are certain famous South African schools that have made virtually no changes to their uniforms in over a century. No concessions have been made for more comfortable school wear for a child sitting in a 2018 South African classroom on a hot summer's day.

Since 1994 there have been enormous social and political changes in our society. Formerly racially segregated schools are open to all; largely homogeneous classrooms and staffrooms are becoming far more heterogeneous. Attitudes towards discipline and the relationships between learners and teachers have had huge mind shifts.

We're all aware of the types of tensions that occur in our schools across the country. Are those tensions caused largely by cultural differences? Could there be clashes around acceptable dress codes? Does the food sold in tuckshops and the food put on staffroom tables reflect an acceptance and appreciation of cultural preferences? What about Assemblies when it comes to respecting religious diversity through homily topics, hymns and prayers?

Quality schools are always in a state of continuous improvement. That's why they're happy and high-achieving. Part of that improvement includes continually adapting the culture to an ever-changing community of children, parents and teachers. Could your classroom and school need a bit more of a culture re-boot?!

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Is your school culture healthy or toxic?

Here's an adaptation of the opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina:

All positive school cultures share common features but each negative school culture is negative in its own way.

There are those schools that are thriving and have successfully embraced our young democratic South Africa. Others aren't. What are the reasons? A critical one is the cultural factor.

When there's a healthy culture, all in the school are treated fairly. Mutual respect is at the core. A toxic school culture is one where people don't feel valued and are looked on favorably only to the extent that they contribute towards the goals decided on by the leadership.

A healthy school culture welcomes cultural change; a toxic school culture resists re-booting and will even resort to sabotaging efforts. Kaplan (2013: 13-15) compares the characteristics of a healthy as against a toxic school thus:
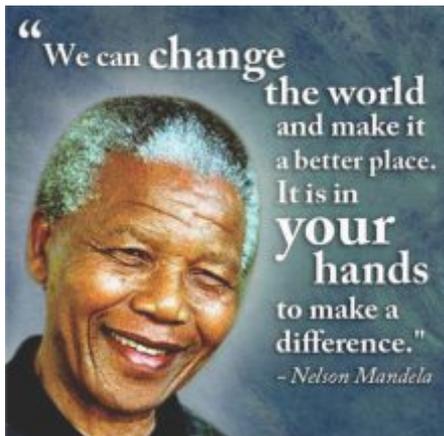
Healthy vs toxic school culture

Healthy school culture	Toxic school culture
All on the staff feel valued by the children, parents and the principal.	Staff feel as if they're treated poorly and are disrespected.
A shared sense of meaningful purpose; an ethos of caring and concern.	There's a lack of meaningful purpose. Do your job and go home.
Values such as collegiality, hard work and openness to new ideas are everywhere.	Leadership is unwilling to change; interpersonal tone is prickly.
Every staff member feels responsible for children's learning to high levels.	Staff blame children for their lack of progress and achievement.
Everyone values professional development, reflection and sharing of expertise.	Professional development and staff reflection are viewed as a waste of time.
Decision-making and problem-solving are shared with children, parents and staff.	Leadership sees all the data and makes all the decisions.
Staff feel motivated, productive, successful and mutually supported.	Staff feel exhausted, frustrated, unhappy, unproductive and unsupported.
Rituals and traditions celebrate the children's achievements, parental commitment and the teachers' innovations.	Individual and group achievements as well as innovations go unnoticed.
Informal network of heroes, heroines and story tellers provide a social web of history and information about the school.	No school heroes or traditions to exemplify the school's purpose or values.

Reference

Kaplan, L S & Owings, W A 2013. *Culture re-boot: reinvigorating school culture to improve school outcomes*. California: Corwin Press.

"We can change the world and make it a better place. It is in your hands to make a difference." — *Nelson Mandela*

Is the culture journey a direct flight?

Imagine that you're on a flight from Johannesburg to Durban. The flying time is only about 50 minutes. The plane ascends up to its' flying altitude, flies at that level for about ten minutes and then descends to land in Durban. During this short flight, how long did the plane stick precisely to the flight path?

You might think it'd be about 80 to 90% of the time. Incorrect. The actual percentage is much lower. In fact, the plane hardly sticks at all to the exact flight path. If the plane is on autopilot, it continually makes many adjustments throughout the flight. The autopilot, "recalculates the gap between where the plane *is* and where the plane *should* be and issues corrective action" (Dobelli 2017: 5).

Good schools focus on a destination or end goal. They know what values they wish to instil in the children; they know what their final outcomes should be. Their reputations are built on them. They maintain that they know what is best for the learners. In some ways, their cultures are static and seem to – in the words of a beer advertisement – "have stood the test of time."

Yet those very same quality schools are also continually tweaking their culture. They are making adjustments – as in the plane analogy above – to their culture flight plans. They realise the importance of making their schools relevant in an ever-evolving society. In that respect, the culture is dynamic and ever-changing.

A school should resist changes simply for the sake of change. If there are individuals and groups who clamour for changes that are radically different to the accepted core values of the school, those changes should be avoided.

So, how do we know what cultural aspects of our school need re-booting? The starting point is a core commitment by the leadership and staff to strive to ensure that it's a happy and hard-working school community. What makes for happy and hard-working children and staff? To arrive at accurate answers, listen and be open-minded.

Give frequent and regular opportunities for children to give suggestions and express their concerns. The same goes for parents and staff. Ensure that there's an encouraging atmosphere that welcomes suggestions.

As we make changes in our schools, we need to feel comfortable about making on-going corrections and revisions. There's usually a gap between what we plan and how it actually works out at the end. Seldom does something work out precisely as planned.

It's not a failure to continually self-correct a plan. Rather, it shows professional humility and maturity. Accept that no school will have the perfect culture where everyone is 100% happy. There'll always be those tensions within a school around what the ideal culture should look like.

Yet you can arrive at a culture that's readily accepted by almost all in the school. Listen, adapt and self-correct as you go on the cultural re-booting flight.

Reference

Dobelli, R 2017. *The art of the good life*. London: Sceptre.

What's the cultural profile of your school?

Before setting out to re-boot the culture in your classroom or school, look at what it's like today. Ask questions such as:

- What are the core values?
- How do people behave?
- What unites people to move to action?

When the interpersonal dynamics are sound, bringing about change is that much easier. Get relationships right before moving into the potential minefield areas of cultural change.

This questionnaire helps describe the cultural profile of an organisation or school. The questionnaire is adapted and based on the research findings done world-wide. In the questionnaire, the higher the added ratings for the first two columns, the more likely the culture characteristic listed in column 3 will be achieved.

On a scale of 1-5, rate how each of these statements describe your school.

1 – Not at all	2 – Not very well	3 – Somewhat well	4 – Very well	5 – Extremely well

| The school is focussed on :	The school feels like:	Total
Mutual trust and teamwork	**A big family**	**Caring**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Compassion and tolerance	**An idealistic community**	**Purpose**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Creativity and exploration	**A dynamic school**	**Learning**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Excitement and fun	**A celebration**	**Enjoyment**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Achievement and winning	**A meritocracy**	**Results**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Boldness and strength	**A competitive arena**	**Authority**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Caution and planning	**Meticulous management**	**Safety**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
Stability and structure	**A smoothly-running school**	**Order**
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	

(Adapted from Groysberg, B 2018: 53)

You might like to get colleagues to complete the questionnaire. Analyse the results and share the findings with them. Lively discussions should follow! Questions that could be asked include the following:

Share our similarities, celebrate our differences.
M. Scott Peck

- What do you like most about the current culture of the school?
- What are the characteristics of those children and staff who are most successful in our school culture?
- When new people to our school don't fit into the culture, what are the most common reasons?

Re-booting the culture in your classroom or school is a never-ending process. There will be those times of strong disagreement. Yet they can be successfully resolved when there's mutual respect.

Take the re-booting plunge. The bracing experience will be exhilarating and make for an even better school for everyone.
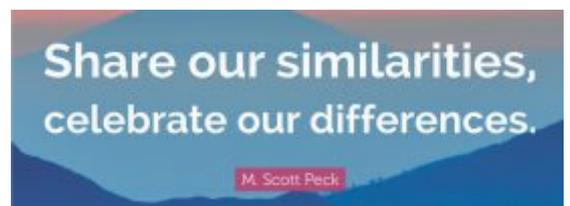
Reference

Groysberg, B et al 2018. *The leader's guide to corporate culture* in **Harvard Business Review**. January- February, pages 44-53.