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School Culture and Change as Learning

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is school culture, and how does it affect leading, teaching, and learning?
- How can culture re-boot succeed in improving school performance when school reform has not?
- In what visible and implicit ways does a school's culture express itself to teachers, administrators, students, and parents?
- Which aspects of school culture support hard work and high achievement?
- In what ways is change organizational learning?
- What are the characteristics of organizations that can learn?
- Which conceptual models can help educators make sense of, plan for, and facilitate change?

WHY 40 YEARS OF SCHOOL REFORM HAS NOT WORKED (AND WHY CULTURE RE-BOOT WILL)

Anthropologists have an old saying: Fish would be the last creatures to discover water, even though water is the most ever-present and influential aspect of a fish's existence. The same might be said of those working within a school's culture. Just as water surrounds fish, shaping their world view and influencing where they swim, culture surrounds and envelopes principals, teachers, students, and parents, shaping their perspectives and influencing their beliefs, assumptions, decisions, and actions.

The lack of serious attention to school culture has stymied efforts to improve schools. While the past 40 years of research have prompted huge shifts in what we know about successful teaching and learning—and despite decades of school reform to advance all students’ achievement—little progress is evident. Research strongly suggests that school improvement occurs when multiple elements are in place, including strong school leadership, a safe and stimulating learning climate, strong ethical and trusting relationships, increased teachers’ professional capacity for instruction and leadership, student-centered instruction, and links to parents and the community. These features cannot occur without supportive, shared school culture norms.

Although school district superintendents and principals feel relentless pressure to raise student achievement, many reform endeavors fail because educators do not understand the complexity of change, consider a school’s culture, or respect its capacity to derail even well-intentioned efforts. A continuous stream of seemingly superficial, unconnected “reforms” has convinced teachers that the system does not know what it is doing. Many teachers feel defensive from external attacks. Others, often the most eager and idealistic, become burned-out reformers.

Attempts to improve schools have largely focused on imposing new rules and practices—restructuring them—rather than reculturing them by making schools the kind of places that stimulate and support teachers to make meaningful changes from the inside.

School cultures are the shared orientations, values, norms, and practices that hold an educational unit together, give it a distinctive identity, and vigorously resist change from the outside. Unless teachers and administrators act intentionally to re-boot the culture of their school, all innovations, collegiality, shared decision making, high standards, and high-stakes tests will have to fit in and around existing cultural elements. Although any type of change presented to schools often meets resistance, implementing new approaches without considering school culture will remain no more than crepe and tinsel, incapable of making much of a difference.

WHAT IS CULTURE RE-BOOT?

Re-booting school culture is more subtle and complex than simply pressing Start or Ctrl+Alt+Del to re-boot a personal computer. One cannot simply discard a shared and habitual way of understanding and acting upon the world. At one time, these shared assumptions and actions worked well and consistently enough to solve school problems. Today, many of them

are no longer effective. But although the assumptions have faded from conscious awareness, the practices they drive remain.

Rather, re-booting school culture requires, in its most basic form, the following:

1. Consciously identifying the school's influences—the basic underlying assumptions, norms, values, and organizational rules that teachers and administrators have been practicing and that students and parents have been following.
2. Examining publicly how well the underlying norms, assumptions, and practices support—or hinder—the faculty and administrators' (and parents') goals for student learning.
3. Challenging those outdated or incompatible assumptions and practices and replacing them with beliefs and actions that directly or indirectly help improve all students' achievement.
4. Monitoring, assessing, and adjusting the outcomes of these changed behaviors where and when needed to create a school where all students can achieve academically and where teachers feel professionally satisfied that they are doing important and high-quality work.

School culture re-boot is a process that makes the implicit explicit. Within a climate of mutual respect, trust, honest self-awareness, and openness to new ideas, teachers and administrators look closely at their own beliefs and behaviors and identify the ways they inadvertently add to the school's and students' difficulties. Then instead of the faculty adapting their behaviors in accord with no-longer helpful assumptions and norms, the re-boot provides a space for teachers to rethink, revise, and refine what they value and believe, what they want to accomplish, and how they think and act. Culture re-boot occurs in a continuous cycle of critical reflection and conversation, action, feedback, reflection, and upgraded action. Culture re-booting is a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral process. The dynamic activity of culture creating and aligning followers' efforts is the essence of leadership.

Re-booting a school culture works because—unlike *knowledge*, which is external—self-reflection, action, and feedback create *knowing*, which is internal. Even valuable information has little meaning to individuals unless it is connected to their personal experiences and gains personal meaning. The re-boot process also builds the school's professional capital: well-qualified, thoughtful individuals working together in focused and committed ways to do better and achieve real improvements.

The good news is that school culture is not static. It is constantly being assembled and shaped through interactions with others and by reflections

on life and the world in general. And, purposeful educators can re-boot and reshape it in ways that make schools into effective leading, teaching, and learning environments.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CULTURE?

School culture may be understood as a historically transmitted cognitive framework of shared but taken-for-granted assumptions, values, norms, and actions—stable, long-term beliefs and practices about what organization members think is important. School culture defines a school's persona. These assumptions, unwritten rules, and unspoken beliefs shape how its members think and do their jobs. They affect relationships, expectations, and behaviors among teachers, administrators, students, and parents. They give meaning to what people say and mold their interpretations of even the most minor daily events. Everything in the organization is affected by its culture and its particular forms and features. Generated, deeply ingrained, and strengthened over the years, these patterns of meaning generally resist change.

Importantly, culture is what the organization's members perceive it to be—not whether the members like or agree with it. In addition, one organization's culture differs from another organization's culture: No two schools have the same culture.

The terms *school culture* and *school climate* are often used interchangeably. Developed as a concept in the late 1950s, "organizational climate" was used to describe what is now defined as "culture"—an enduring quality of organizational life.¹ Currently, *organizational culture* is the more popular term for studying effective schools, largely because many 1980s books on successful business corporations made the word part of our daily language.

Schools as Complex Organizations

Schools are complicated places—multifaceted organisms as well as part of larger systems. Some avow that, as institutions, schools are far more socially and politically complex than businesses.

To begin, students bring numerous ethnic cultures, languages, and habits of mind to the classroom, each associated with varying child-rearing approaches, communication styles, and cultural and educational customs.

¹For a discussion of the history and development of organizational culture and climate concepts, see: Hoy, W. K. (1990). Organizational climate and culture: A conceptual analysis of the school workplace. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 1(2), 149–168.

Next, the formal education system in itself embodies middle-class assumptions and traditions, several of which—democratic community, individualism, and corporate capitalism, for example—hold inconsistent values, norms, myths, and cardinal virtues. For instance, as “the great equalizers,” American public schools are supposed to give diverse students, through their hard work and merit, opportunities to reach any station in life. At the same time, schools vigorously sort and select students for qualitatively different education programs and, ultimately, diverging future economic, social, and life roles.

Meanwhile, the culture of bureaucracy provides another layer, enforcing its own values, beliefs, assumptions, and communication methods as well as prescribed processes for decision making, prioritizing issues, and allocating resources. Finally, the essentially political nature of educational governance and bureaucracy interacts with all the other variables in ways that affect the intellectual, material, moral, and fiscal resources available to students in any particular school at any given time.

Clearly, schools are not simply buildings with people inside. They are systems. Each part is dependent upon the other parts, and changes in one part cause cascading reactions in all parts. To transform schools, therefore, it is necessary to consider the effects of change on all the parts of the enterprise.

As a result, all educators work within a cultural context that impacts every facet of their work but that is pervasive, elusive, and difficult to define. Culture is the general feel people get when they walk into a school and through its halls. A school’s culture—“the way we do things around here”—influences every aspect of school life, including how teachers feel about their students, how administrators relate to teachers, what teachers consider as professional attire, what staff do and don’t discuss in the teachers’ lounge, whether teachers work in isolation or with colleagues, how teachers decorate their classrooms, their emphasis on certain curricular topics, their willingness to change, and their confidence in their collective abilities to achieve their ambitions. These culturally determined attitudes and behaviors are interrelated and interact.

Specifically, school culture appears in many aspects of school life:

- **Social climate**—including a safe and caring environment in which all students feel welcomed and valued and have a sense of ownership of their school.
- **Intellectual climate**—in which every classroom supports and challenges all students to do their very best and achieve work of quality; this includes a strong, rigorous, and engaging curriculum and a powerful pedagogy for teaching it.

- **Rules and policies**—in which all school members are accountable to high standards of learning and behavior.
- **Traditions and routines**—established from shared values and that honor and reinforce the school’s academic, ethical, and social standards.
- **Structures**—for giving teachers, staff, and students a voice in, and shared responsibility for, making decisions and solving problems that affect the school environment and their lives in it.
- **Partnerships**—ways of effectively joining with parents, businesses, and community organizations to support students’ learning and character growth.
- **Norms for relationships and behavior**—expectations and actions that create a professional culture of excellence and ethics.

All these aspects must be addressed in the culture re-boot process.

How School Culture Shapes the Organization

School culture creates a psychosocial environment that profoundly impacts teachers, administrators, and students. A school’s culture shapes its organization. By strengthening shared meaning among employees, culture serves a variety of functions inside the school:

- **Identity**—culture’s clearly defined and shared perceptions and values give organization members a sense of who they are and their distinctiveness as a group.
- **Commitment**—culture facilitates the growth of commitment to something larger than individual self-interest.
- **Behavior standards**—culture guides employees’ words and actions, providing a behavioral consistency by specifying appropriate norms and unwritten rules for what employees should say and do in given situations.
- **Social control**—shared cultural values, beliefs, and practices direct behavior through informal rules (institutionalized norms) that members generally follow, enhance the social system’s stability, and reinforce and shape the culture in a self-repeating cycle.

Aspects of school culture can either benefit or harm the organization. On the positive, strong culture can reduce ambiguity, increase faculty and staff members’ commitment and consistency, and direct all efforts toward a desired common goal. A strong and positive culture can increase the scope, depth, complexity, and success of what teachers teach and what students learn and achieve. In contrast, culture is a liability when the

shared values are not in agreement with those that will advance the school's goals and effectiveness. This is most likely to occur when the organization's environment is undergoing rapid change. While employee consistency is an advantage in a stable environment, during times of fast-paced social or technological transformation—such as we are presently experiencing in our interconnected, information-rich world—the attitudes and behaviors valued by the established culture may no longer be appropriate or useful.

How School Cultures Develop

A school's current customs, traditions, and general way of doing things largely reflect what has been done before with some success. Schools develop their organizational cultures through three different but closely linked concepts:

- A body of solutions to external and internal problems that has worked consistently for a group is taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think about, feel, and act in relation to those problems.
- These eventually come to be assumptions about the nature of reality, truth, time, space, human nature, human activity, and human relationships in that setting.
- Over time, these assumptions, crystalized by repetition and reinforcement, come to be presumed, unchallenged, and finally drop out of awareness. A culture's power lies in the fact that it operates as a set of unconscious, unexamined assumptions that are taken for granted. They are strictly enforced through social sanction.

School cultures develop in their unique ways because they once solved problems and continue to serve a useful purpose. Because society, people, objectives, and resources change over time, however, once useful solutions may no longer function in the organization's best interests. School leaders can nurture the formation of new norms—and re-boot their culture—when they facilitate a shared set of values, goals, and behaviors along with continuous individual and collective efforts to enact them, creating the new “way we do things around here.” If sustained collegial activities centered on improving individual and collective practice and increasing student learning are not part of the school culture, then developing these norms and capacities becomes an important objective. Culture re-boot is essential to ensure that the schools' orientation, assumptions, norms, and practices are still—or become—effective means to pursue the current vision, values, and goals.

Why the Traditional Public School Culture No Longer Works

Public school culture is shaped and maintained by experiences with the larger environment, historical eras, and contact with others. Historically, American public school cultures and programs developed for an industrial age. In the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, the booming industrial economy welcomed low-skill, low-information workers for factory assembly lines and a few college-educated professionals. Rigid divisions of responsibilities and social status separated management and workers. Preparing future employees for industrial jobs, schools were designed to run like factories, sorting, selecting, and preparing labor for assembly lines or professions, using bell schedules to organize learning time and academic and vocational departments to guide instruction. Principals were expected to be efficient managers of people, time, space, and funds.

With the traditional public school culture reflecting a bureaucratic, top-down authority, teachers could choose to ignore imposed decisions and directions by closing their classroom doors. In contrast,

Figure 1.1 The factory model school no longer works in today's world.



Source: Art by Jem Sullivan.

today's successful schools require a culture in which spheres of influence operate by consensus around mutual goals and assume the function that authority played in a traditional organization. Today's information-rich, hyper-connected, society requires every high school graduate to have high levels of reading and mathematical literacy, written and oral communication skills, and competence in problem solving and teamwork, regardless of the student's ethnic, racial, or economic background.

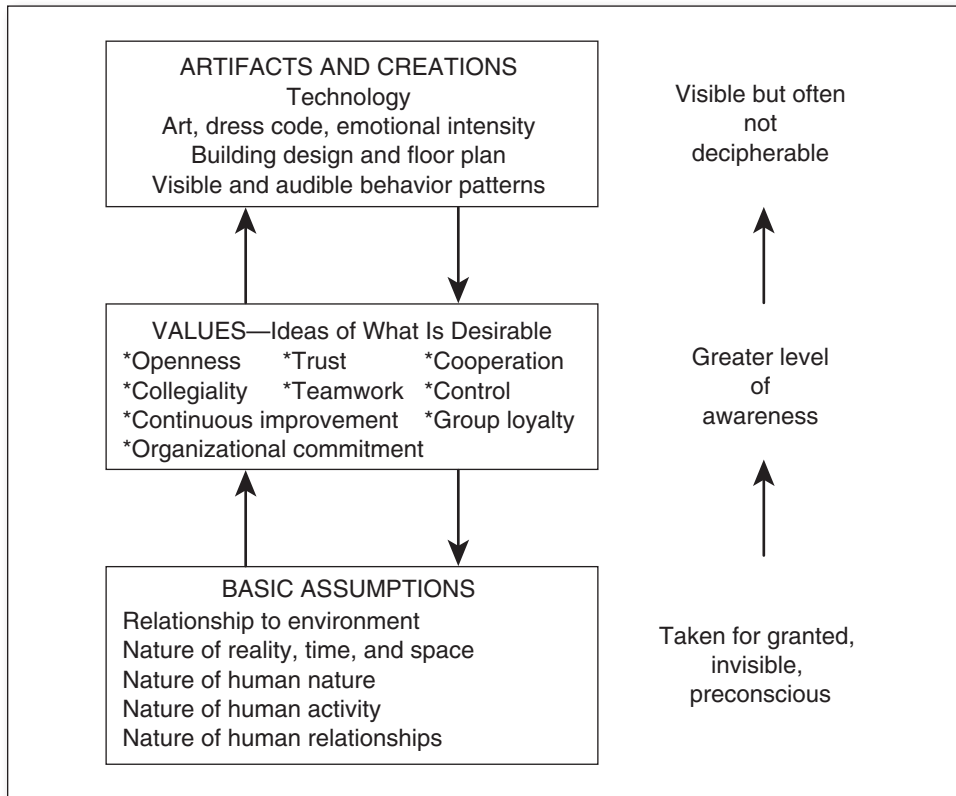
Yesterday's economic realities did not require every student to learn at high levels. Today's realities for students are different. School assumptions and practices that worked well enough then do not work well enough now. Systemic changes are needed. While decision-making power that resides in one person or group may change other people's public actions, it may not change their preferences or behind-closed-door behaviors. In schools with shared influence, positive collegial pressure sways teachers to enact their roles differently than they may have done before. What teachers give up in individual autonomy, they make up in their collective ability to do things to enhance student learning that the teacher was not able to do while working alone. And when all teachers are working collaboratively to ensure every student is learning and achieving, all students benefit.

Three Levels of School Culture

Despite the generalities needed to describe it, school culture is not merely an abstraction. People can see, hear, touch, and feel an organization's culture in its facilities, art, technology, and human behaviors.

Edgar Schein, an expert in organizational culture, asserts that a school's culture can exist on three levels, ranging across a continuum from concrete to abstract (Figure 1.2). At the first level, artifacts—such as school colors, mascots, or slogans—can be seen and touched. But, these signs are only cultural symbols usually below most people's awareness. Next, less visibly, the school's cultural values lie in its written mission statement (such as "Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor"), philosophy, or motto (e.g., "Children First"). These documents or slogans help express the school's basic assumptions and goals. Finally, the assumptions taken for granted, those that are invisible and outside consciousness—the culture's essence—deal with individuals' relationships to the environment and other people. Although outside awareness, they form implicit, unconscious patterns that members uncritically accept unless some questioning process—such as school culture re-booting—calls them to the surface.

Figure 1.2 Three Levels of School Culture



Sources: Adapted from Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 14, Figure 1; Schein, E. H. (1990). *Organizational culture*. *American Psychologist*, 4(2), 109–119, p. 114, Table 2; Hoy, W. K., & Miskel, C. G. (2008). *Educational administration. Theory, research, and practice* (8th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill, p. 178, Figure 5.1

SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT 1.1

Using Levels of Culture to Understand Your School Culture

Teachers and administrators can begin to know their school culture better by considering the three levels of culture and noticing how they appear in their school. As with all activities in this book, you may use an outside facilitator or have a school leader serve in this role.

1. Separate into three groups. Assign a group to each of the following culture levels: artifacts, values, or basic assumptions.
2. Ask each group to take 10 minutes to brainstorm all the school culture items or beliefs they can identify for their level that convey what their school values.

3. Then, conduct a 15-minute walkabout with your group to observe and identify school culture elements in your main entry, main office, halls, classrooms, cafeteria, teachers' lounge, gymnasium, and teacher and student restrooms. When teachers spot a cultural element, they should point it out to colleagues and see if they agree that it does reflect the school's culture and whether they think it effectively or indifferently motivates teachers' and students' best efforts.
4. Groups return to meeting room and report findings back to the larger group.
5. Discuss:
 - Which group had the most difficult time identifying elements in the school's culture level? Why do you think this is so?
 - Identify some of the school culture elements you observed and where you observed them.
 - What do these cultural elements express about what the faculty and administration value?
 - Which of these cultural elements express what your students and parents value?
 - Which cultural elements are the most effective in conveying these messages? Which are the least effective? Which give the wrong message?
 - What else do the faculty and administrators value that are not clearly expressed by these varied cultural elements?
 - What else do students and parents value that are not clearly expressed by these cultural elements?
 - How can thinking about school culture and how you express what you believe are your most important goals help you do your jobs better?
 - What is the worth in having teacher leaders or faculty spend more time (on another occasion or occasions) thinking about values and assumptions in order to make work more meaningful, satisfying, and productive for yourselves and your students?
6. On a different day, conduct this same activity with teachers in each department, the student council, and the parent teacher student association members for their experience, identification of the school's cultural elements, and feedback from these essential school community members.

Learning an organization's culture is at once a behavioral, cognitive, and emotional process. The unique culture is taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to organizational problems—"the way we do things around here." Once the group has learned these common assumptions, the resulting automatic patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving provide meaning, stability, and comfort. The shared learning helps reduce group anxiety that results

from the inability to understand or predict events. In part, reducing this anxiety strengthens the culture.

As a result, challenging school culture elements and practices can be emotionally upsetting to those who follow these unwritten rules. To question their beliefs and practices may seem as an assault on their identities. It is important to recognize that discussions of school culture need to deal not only with people's ideas but also with their feelings about these ideas. Change facilitators are advised to be people sensitive and to listen and watch team members carefully, so they can fully understand what each member means and respond respectfully to their views—which may be expressed verbally and nonverbally.

COMPONENTS OF POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURES

Considering the levels of school culture and the ways people identify and understand their own schools' artifacts, values, and assumptions begins to sensitize them to these influential aspects of their work environments. A more comprehensive frame of reference about school culture can show how it may enhance their professional effectiveness.

Positive School Culture Characteristics

Research suggests that school cultures that support hard work and high achievement contain the following 10 characteristics:

- **An inspiring vision**—the extent to which a school has a clear and motivating purpose, expressed by a charismatic leader, focused on all students meeting challenging academic goals and backed by a well-defined, limited, and stimulating mission. The widely shared perception of these school goals as important supports this factor.
- **Leadership**—the people and process that help others define and invest in the inspiring vision and that encourage teachers, staff, students, and parents to fully endorse the other characteristics on this list as they adapt to change.
- **Innovation and risk taking**—the degree to which principal, faculty, and staff are encouraged to be innovative, experiment, and take thoughtful risks rather than work to maintain the status quo. This includes flexibility and backing from the school district.
- **High expectations**—the extent to which the school members hold a pervasive focus on student and teacher learning along with a continual conversation about the quality of everyone's work.

- **Trust and confidence**—the extent to which those in the organization can depend on close, supportive teacher–student, teacher–teacher, teacher–administrator, student–student, and parent–school relationships. A sense of community aids this factor.
- **Referring to the knowledge base**—the extent to which administrators and faculty use timely and accurate quantitative and qualitative information to continuously improve their processes, performances, and outcomes. This includes curriculum, modes of instruction, assessment, and learning opportunities clearly linked to the vision and mission and tailored to the students’ needs and interests.
- **Involvement in decision making**—the degree of participation granted by administrators to teachers, staff, students, and parents to receive relevant and timely information, discuss its meaning in terms of school values and goals, and share in making decisions that affect the school.
- **Honest, open communication**—the degree to which the school provides many opportunities and venues for sharing information in clear and unambiguous ways among organization members. This includes creating culture, discussing fundamental values, taking responsibility, coming together as a community, and celebrating individual and group successes.
- **Tangible support**—the degree to which faculty and staff receive sufficient encouragement, resources (including teamwork and time), and opportunities to effectively meet their professional responsibilities as well as contribute to their organization’s well-being.
- **Appreciation and recognition**—the degree to which the school community shows its gratitude and esteem for those members who are making meaningful contributions to the organization or to its members. A school’s customs, traditions, and general ways of doing things illustrate the extent of this characteristic in action.

Each of these characteristics exists on a continuum from low to high. Assessing the school as an organization on these 10 characteristics can provide a composite profile of the organization’s culture. Does the organization respect people? Does it encourage collaboration and teamwork? Does it reward innovation? Does it encourage or discourage initiative? Does it value differing viewpoints? Does it welcome individuals from differing ages, backgrounds, genders, races, ethnicities, languages, or abilities? Does it value continuous improvement? In turn, this profile becomes the foundation for the members’ shared understanding about the organization, how it accomplishes its purposes, the way members are expected to act—and helps identify areas ripe for re-booting.

School cultures may be weak or strong. In a strong culture, the organization's core values are both intensely held and widely shared. The more members agree on what the organization stands for, the greater their commitment to those core values and the stronger the culture. A strong culture will have a powerful influence on its members' behaviors because the high degree of common ideals and intensity create an internal climate of high behavioral control. This unity of purpose builds group cohesiveness, loyalty, and organizational commitment, while it lowers employee turnover. In weak cultures, the opposite occurs.

Likewise, school cultures may be healthy or toxic. As described in Table 1.1, healthy organizational cultures are organizations that treat their people well. Toxic organizational cultures are organizations in which people do not feel valued and are considered only as valuable as their production, much as cogs in machinery. In healthy school cultures, members share a consistent sense of purpose and values. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents enact norms of continuous learning and school improvement. All feel a sense of responsibility for student learning. Staff members have collaborative and collegial relationships in which they can exchange ideas, identify problems, and determine workable solutions. Everyone prizes professional development, staff reflection, and sharing of professional practice, so members can interact around their craft to improve teaching and leading. In toxic cultures, the opposite occurs.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of Healthy and Toxic School Cultures

<i>Healthy School Culture Characteristics</i>	<i>Toxic School Culture Characteristics</i>
Faculty and staff feel valued and esteemed by the principal, students, parents, and central office administrators.	Staff feel as if they are treated poorly, disrespected, and as if they were part of the furniture.
Faculty and staff have a shared sense of meaningful purpose, what is important, an ethos of caring and concern, and a genuine commitment to helping students learn.	Faculty and staff lack a shared sense of meaningful purpose; norms reinforce inertia. Employees want to do their jobs and leave. Faculty believe that it is their job to teach and the students' job to learn.
Underlying norms are collegiality, collaboration, continuous learning, openness to new ideas, problem solving, improvement, and hard work.	Administrators and faculty are unwilling to change. Interpersonal tone is oppositional and prickly. Collaboration is discouraged.
Every faculty and staff member feels responsible for every student's learning to high levels.	Faculty and staff blame students for their lack of progress and achievement.

<i>Healthy School Culture Characteristics</i>	<i>Toxic School Culture Characteristics</i>
Everyone values professional development and reflection, sharing professional practice, so all can improve their skills in teaching and leading.	Professional development and staff reflection viewed as a waste of time: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” and “this too shall pass” are the ethos.
Data, problem solving, and decision making are shared with faculty, staff, students, and parents.	Principals see all data and make all decisions.
Faculty and staff feel motivated, productive, successful, and mutually supportive.	Faculty and staff feel exhausted, unproductive, frustrated, and unhappy, unsupportive of colleagues with occasional hostility among staff.
Rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation, and parental commitment.	Individual and group innovations and achievements go unnoticed.
Informal network of storytellers, heroes, and heroines provide a social web of information, support, and history.	No school traditions or heroes exemplify the school’s purpose or values.

In addition, most large schools have several cultures operating within them.

While most organizations have a *dominant culture*—a distinctive, overarching personality that reflects its strongest perceptions and core values—people tend to have more attitudes and values in common with others working close to them than with those working elsewhere in the organization. These various groups have several different *subcultures*—cultures existing within defined parts of the organization rather than throughout it. These subcultures may be noted by their work functions or geographic distances.

For instance, a high school’s English department teachers may have a different culture than the English supervisor and curriculum specialists at the central office. Math department members may have very different ways of seeing and organizing their responsibilities than do social studies department members. The counseling department may see the school in still another way. Similarly, younger teachers may hold different expectations for their careers and how they conduct their work lives than do veteran educators in their own departments.

CHANGE AS ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Learning involves *change*, an alteration in the individual as a result of interaction with the environment. Because learning is inherent in the concept of change, any change in behavior implies that learning is occurring

or has occurred. Change in organizations, therefore, is organizational learning. But, only people—not facilities—can learn. And, one of the first things that educators need to understand if they are to re-boot and refine their school culture in fruitful ways—and create organizational learning—is the nature of change and the change process. This knowledge supports the perspective, persistence, and patience they will need to successfully re-boot.

In his book, *The Challenge of School Change* (1997),² Michael Fullan observes that the change process is uncontrollably complex, dynamic, and often unpredictable. Productive change rests on a constant search for comprehension and seeking better ways of thinking about and managing a naturally erratic process. Understanding interrelationships rather than cause-and-effect links and recognizing processes of change rather than one-point-in-time snapshots provide real leverage for organizational learning.

Just as travelers use up-to-date road maps to help them visualize and plan journeys, educators can use a set of conceptual maps—or models—to help them anticipate, plan for, and conduct a successful culture re-boot. Change is nonlinear, full of uncertainty. Difficulties are assured—early and often—even when doing the right things and doing things right. Change, therefore, is best understood as a journey, not as a static blueprint. Having the best maps and reading them correctly will help us choose the most efficient routes to our destination. It will also help us avoid selecting roads that would move us in the wrong direction. At the same time, we must keep the flexibility to assess daily the road conditions, the resources, and the weather and make necessary adjustments en route.

Conceptual Models That Boost Organizational Learning

Conceptual models help us predict, understand, and respond more effectively to complex interactions. If, as Fullan observes, change is an uncontrollable, complex, dynamic, and often unpredictable process, having clear ways of understanding and thinking about the change process and its interrelationships can help us manage it. Such models also provide increased leverage for organizational learning.

We will consider four archetypes: characteristics of a learning organization that support continuous improvement; a three-step model for understanding change; a double-loop learning model that improves outcomes by addressing causes rather than symptoms; and a model of the multiple frames that sustain a school's culture. These conceptual maps help mark the psychosocial contours of school change and culture re-boot. They are

²Fullan, M. (1997). *The challenge of school change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 33–56.

also practical tools for school leadership teams to use during culture re-boot to make sure they consider all relevant dimensions that impact their work.

Characteristics of a Learning Organization

A learning organization is one that culls past and present experiences for important lessons and principles, uncovering yesterday's important ideas and meanings to help clarify purpose and energize employees for tomorrow. Experimentation and learning from mistakes help people discover what works and what doesn't. Without shared values, norms, and goals, an organization drifts from one new idea to the next, often repeating past mistakes and failing to learn from either successes or disappointments.

Viewing organizational learning from a systems' perspective, Peter Senge, a management expert, believes that organizations—like schools—that excel will be those that discover how to develop people's commitment and capacity to learn at all organizational levels. Learning organizations are those where people continually expand their capacity to create their desired results. Schools can only improve through individuals who learn. While individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, no organizational learning occurs without it.

To Senge, most organizations learn poorly. The way they are designed and managed, the way people's job descriptions are defined, the way individuals have been taught to think and interact create fundamental "learning disabilities."³ In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge identifies five factors that together enhance an organization's—in our case, a school's—ability to learn. Briefly, these include the following:

- **Personal mastery**—a lifelong process of continually clarifying and deepening individual understanding of reality and what is important to us, integrating reason with intuition, and perceiving and working with forces of change. Personal mastery fosters individuals' motivation to keep learning how their actions affect the world.
- **Mental models**—deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or images—frequently operating unconsciously—that influence how we understand and act, including what can and cannot be done in life or in organizations. Opening our thinking to more accurate models, rigorous scrutiny, and challenge allows us to identify shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world and become open to change.
- **Building a shared vision**—a critical leadership role that motivates people in organizations to a common identity, the desire to excel and

³Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline. The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

learn, and collective advancement of their agenda because they *want* to rather than because they are *told* to.

- **Team learning**—developed through shared focus, openness, and interactions (especially using reflection, inquiry, and thinking together without defensiveness). The intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the team’s members, and the team develops extraordinary capacities for coordinated reflection and action.
- **Systems thinking**—a holistic conceptual framework by which understanding the whole depends on recognizing the contributions of its individual parts. All parts of the school organization are connected to all other interrelated parts, which must be considered in any organizational change.

For a school to successfully re-boot its culture, all aspects listed above must be considered, assessed, and put into play. Making these characteristics essential parts of your school culture will ensure a healthy and productive environment for leading, teaching, and learning.

SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT 1.2

Making Our School a Learning Organization

Effective schools are learning organizations that have certain qualities that make them capable of positive change and meaningful outcomes. See if you think you and your school have these essential features, and decide what it would take to re-boot your school as a learning organization.

1. As a large group, using Senge’s idea of personal mastery, identify the types of personal mastery that you and your colleagues need in order to help each student be academically successful in your classes. Also, define what mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking look like, sound like, or feel like if functioning well in your school.
2. Consider the definitions above and your discussion of what learning organization characteristics look, sound, and feel like, and complete the brief table below individually. Then, compare answers in groups of four. Finally, compare answers with the large group.
3. Discuss your findings as a small and large group:
 - Which of these five characteristics seems most alive and well in your school? What do they look, sound, or feel like in your school?
 - Which of these characteristics seems most missing in action in your school? What does their absence look, sound, or feel like in your school?

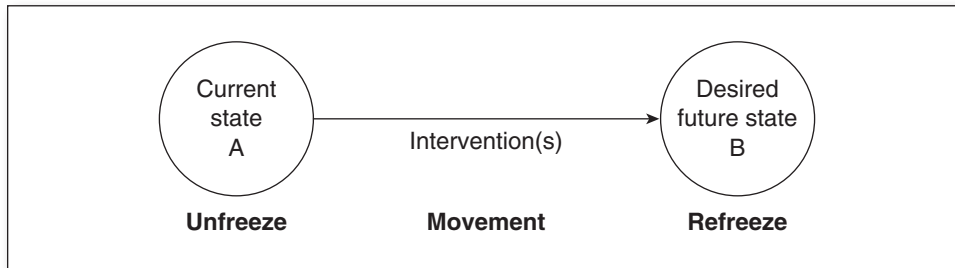
- What learning organization characteristics does this group need to strengthen before it can help the rest of the faculty build its capacity as a learning organization?
- What could your school's leadership team, or you, do to help build these capacities among yourself and your colleagues? In what realistic time frame? What resources would be needed? What would be the indicators of growth in any of these areas?

<i>Learning Organization Characteristic</i>	<i>This Characteristic in Me: Yes/Not sure/No</i>	<i>This Characteristic in Our Leadership Team: Yes/Not sure/No</i>	<i>This Characteristic in Our Faculty: Yes/Not sure/No</i>
Personal Mastery Examples:			
Mental Models Examples:			
Building a Shared Vision Examples:			
Team Learning Examples:			
Systems Thinking Examples:			

4. As an informal assessment of your school's growth as a learning organization, have your leadership team redo this activity after your group has completed each chapter and again after completing this book.

The Three-Step Change Model

Kurt Lewin, a pioneer of modern social and organizational psychology, gives us a useful template for understanding change. Reducing complex change dynamics to its essence, his model's simplicity helps us identify the key factors in the change process. Lewin sees fundamental organizational change as having several distinct phases: initiating, moving, and sustaining. Figure 1.3 illustrates these as Unfreeze, Movement, and Refreeze. Follow-through is as essential as starting. We will describe what the stages entail with familiar school language and examples.

Figure 1.3 Kurt Lewin's Three-Step Change Model

Source: Marshak, R. J. (1993). Lewin meets Confucius: A review of the organizational development model of change. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 29(4), 397.

Stage 1—Unfreeze: Motivate teachers to change. This can be done by upsetting one's sense of safety and control. Faculty and staff tend to seek settings that give them an identity and comfortable stability. If they become uncomfortable—perhaps by receiving information that makes them dissatisfied with the current conditions—they become more willing to let go of (unfreeze) old ways of thinking and behaving in favor of more effective ones and those more in line with their goals.

For instance, a high school faculty says they believe in educational equity—giving each student what he or she needs to be academically successful in class. They take pride in their social justice bent. When looking at student achievement data, however, teachers discover that their affluent high achievers tend to be in classes with 1:15 teacher–student ratios (largely in advanced placement, or AP, and international baccalaureate, or IB, classes), while low-achieving and free- and reduced-price lunch students tend to be in classes with 1:33 teacher–student ratios (mainly in the general “college prep” curriculum). These data disrupt teachers’ beliefs about their fairness to their neediest students. The facts and their experiences show that the students who require the most individual teacher–student time in order to learn actually receive the least. This uncomfortable reality may provoke teachers to rethink how they organize students for instruction, how they staff certain courses, how they deliver instruction, and how they assess students’ progress to advance their learning.

Stage 2—Movement: Change what needs to be changed. Once teachers are sufficiently unhappy with the current conditions and ready to make a positive change, it is necessary to specify exactly what needs

to be altered. Teachers need a clear and concise view of the new desired state, so they can plainly see the gap between the present situation and the proposed one.

For example, when teachers who say they value educational equity view disconcerting school data that show they are doing the opposite, they may gradually recognize that they have much to learn if they are to make their espoused views a reality. Teachers, counselors, and administrators may decide they want two semesters of job-embedded professional development from a well-respected expert on each of two related topics: how to make educational equity a reality in their school and combining engaging instruction with formative assessments to help all students, especially those who need additional teacher help (through feedback and reteaching) to master challenging content.

Stage 3—Refreeze: Make the change permanent. Refreezing seeks to stabilize and maintain the teachers in the new condition to ensure that the unfamiliar behaviors are relatively safe from backsliding. Here, the new practices become a habit (refreeze), and the teachers develop expanded skills, an enhanced self-concept, and more supportive personal relationships.

Providing professional development in the equity scenario above is a start, but it is not enough to ensure actual teacher behavior changes or improved student outcomes. Administrators and counselors also will have to change the staffing for certain courses to improve the teacher–student ratios and place appropriate (able and willing) teachers into these classes. In addition, scheduling bimonthly peer and administrator observations, enabling peer coaching (if desired), team planning with other teachers of the same subject, and using frequent assessment results to revise instruction and promote learning are strategies that can reinforce and refine teachers’ new behaviors. In this way, new behaviors become regular practices. And, equity in action becomes part of the school culture.

Of course, the new practices must be congruent to some degree with the rest of the teachers’ behavior, personality, and environment, or they will simply lead to a fresh round of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Because teachers want to help each student be academically successful, conducting change as a group activity creates a positive peer pressure that makes it more likely that the organizational culture, group norms, policies, and practices will sustain the new behaviors. Likewise, educating parents about the “whys” for this change can garner wider support.

SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT 1.3

Using the Three-Step Change Model

The three-step change model provides a straightforward paradigm for understanding the essence of change. Discuss as a group:

- Which of the three steps in the change model do you tend to see most often in school improvement? Which steps do you see less often? Explain why this may be so.
- Describe a time when you experienced personal or professional change. Did you initiate the change, or was it forced on you? How well did the three-step change model fit your experiences? Which steps were present? Which steps were lacking? What was the result of the change for you? What role does your desire for the change play in the decision to include all three steps?
- Identify and describe a major attempt at change that you have observed in our society. How successful was the change attempt? Which steps were present? Which steps were lacking? How might the change have been different had all steps been part of the process?
- Discuss the factors that make it difficult for the three-step change model to work in schools.
- Discuss the personal, social, cognitive, and institutional factors that would help the three-step change model work effectively in schools. Which of these are available in your own school? If any are missing or insufficient, how do you make them available in your school?

The Single- and Double-Loop Learning Model

Fixing school problems by treating their symptoms rather than their causes is a recipe for frustration and failure. Management professors Chris Argyris and his colleague, Donald Schön, believe that learning involves detecting and correcting a problem by addressing its underlying causes rather than treating its surface indicators. Their model explains why solutions that address an organization's governing variables—its underlying values and assumptions, such as those in school culture—can meaningfully change the organization. Simply adding new programs and practices (without challenging the underlying assumptions and behaviors) cannot.

They consider three elements (Figure 1.4).

- **Governing variables**—dynamics that keep the status quo, such as underlying values, assumptions, and organizational rules that people are trying to keep within acceptable limits. In a school context, governing variables are the school culture.

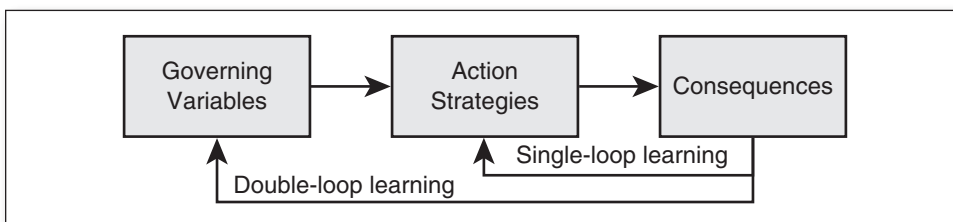
- **Action strategies**—the plans and moves people use to keep their governing variables within the acceptable range. In schools, these might include school improvement strategies and their implementation.
- **Consequences**—what happens as a result of an action—both intended and unintended—which may affect both an individual and others. In schools, these may include a range of student, teacher, and parent outcomes, including achievement test results and survey findings.

In single-loop learning, when something is not working well, many look for a practice that will solve the problem within the same set of assumptions and norms (governing variables or school culture). They tweak the symptoms instead of challenging the underlying norms upon which their actions rest. As in Figure 1.4, feedback from consequences returns to the action strategies and not to the governing variables. As a result, typically, the problem will continue or reappear in another form.

Double-loop learning, in contrast, involves questioning the organization's norms, values, and assumptions (the governing variables or school culture) that support the problematic or ineffective practice. With double-loop learning, principals and teachers first challenge and change the underlying governing values and norms and then fix the action. As seen in Figure 1.4, the outcome's feedback goes to the governing variables and assumptions, which then influence the action strategies and affect the resulting consequences. Ideally, constructive change occurs and stays.

Here's an educational parallel: The school norm is for teachers to teach and students to learn. Teachers believe that the responsibility for mastery and achievement rests with the student. In single-loop learning, algebra teachers require failing students to spend more time practicing homework problems before taking the unit's test. For double-loop learning, algebra teachers diagnose the nature of the students' mistakes on homework, classwork, and quizzes and reteach the relevant math skills to the students

Figure 1.4 Single- and Double-Loop Learning



Source: Adapted from Argyris, C. (1993). *Knowledge for action: A guide to overcoming barriers to organizational change*. Jossey Bass, p. 51. Copyright © 1993 John Wiley & Sons.

at the appropriate level of difficulty—regardless of the grade-level curriculum at which the weak skills typically belong. The teachers might also provide tutoring after school, rejecting the notion that all teaching and learning must occur during classroom time. In double-loop learning, teachers challenge the school’s core beliefs and norms (governing variables) that students are fully responsible for their own achievement and then act in ways to change the teachers’ expectations and behaviors by sharing the accountability for student success.

Argyris has compared single-loop learning to a thermostat that “learns” to turn on the heat if the room temperature drops below 68 degrees. Double-loop learning happens when an error is detected and corrected in ways that involve modifying the organization’s underlying norms, values, assumptions, policies, and objectives. Imagine an “intelligent” thermostat that can evaluate whether 68 degrees is the right temperature for optimum efficiency for the purposes and activities expected to occur in that room.

SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT 1.4 **Using Single- and Double-Loop Learning**

Understanding how single- and double-loop learning operates and helps explain why many school improvement innovations fail—and what it takes to make school improvements succeed.

1. In groups of four, identify several school improvement innovations either in your own school or in other schools that reflected single-loop learning. What was the problem or problems the innovation was intended to solve? How effective were these strategies in accomplishing their goals? What is your evidence for this conclusion?
2. In the same groups, identify a school improvement innovation either in your own school or in other schools that reflected double-loop learning. What was the problem the innovation was intended to solve? How effective were these strategies in accomplishing their goals? What is your evidence for this conclusion?
3. Come together as one large group. Discuss:
 - What makes this small group discussion activity difficult to do?
 - Give an example of a decision your school made that involved single-loop learning and its outcomes.
 - Give an example of a decision your school made that involved double-loop learning and its outcomes.
 - Why do you think educators rely on single-loop learning strategies rather than double-loop learning strategies for school improvement?
 - What do you think makes designing and implementing double-loop strategies so difficult for teachers and administrators?

- How can educators overcome these difficulties?
- What do you see as possible gains from designing and implementing double-loop learning strategies?
- How would you know if you had designed a single- or double-loop learning strategy? What would you look for in order to find out?
- How can understanding the differences between the two approaches be helpful in making positive changes in your school?

The Multiple Frames Model

In *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (2008), educational leadership professors Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal observe that individuals tend to examine issues and organizations through one predominant mental model or lens (like a school culture)—restricting their ability to see the whole picture and consider the issues' actual complexity.⁴ These lenses are preconditioned filters that often resist questioning their view of how an organization works—or how it might work better. When their frames of reference accurately fit the circumstances, they can understand and shape human experience. In contrast, when their frames of reference do not correctly define the situation, misconceptions can result. Then, faulty diagnosis leads to faulty action.

In an increasingly multifaceted and ambiguous world, they argue, the best leaders use multiple frames or lenses to consider common challenges, pinpoint what is really happening, and influence outcomes.

Bolman and Deal also believe that leadership is contextual; different situations require different patterns of thinking. Framing, and then *reframing*—consciously sizing up a situation from multiple perspectives and then finding a new way to address it—helps leaders (or anyone) clarify, anticipate, and comprehensively resolve dilemmas. Additionally, having more than one option generates reasonable alternatives that lead to effective solutions.

Accordingly, Bolman and Deal suggest four categories by which we can accurately frame our experiences:

- **Structural frame**—emphasizes clear organizational standards and goals, rationality, coordination, efficiency, structure, and policies. Structural leaders value analysis and data, keep their eye on budgeting, set clear direction and measurable standards, hold people accountable for results, and try to solve organizational problems with new policies and rules.

⁴Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

- **Human resource frame**—stresses interaction between individual (relationships, feelings, needs, preferences, or abilities) and organizational needs. Showing concern for others, providing sufficient opportunities for participation and shared decision making, and seeking win-win collaborations are among the ways to nurture a sense of commitment and involvement with the organization.
- **Political frame**—focuses on conflict or tension among different groups and agendas competing for scarce resources. Political leaders are advocates and negotiators who invest much of their time and energy networking, creating coalitions, building power bases, resolving disputes over resource allocations, and finding compromise and renewal.
- **Symbolic frame**—emphasizes the socially constructed meaning and predictability in organizational culture, rituals, beliefs, and symbols—including myth, ritual, ceremony, stories, and other figurative forms—that govern behavior through shared values, informal agreements, and implicit understanding.

Each frame offers new possibilities for generating positive outcomes. In addressing school situations, most educators rely on the structural or human resource lenses. Is the proposed solution acceptable within the district's or school's policy handbook and guidelines? Is the proposed solution acceptable within the limits of teachers' contracts? Yet, many school situations are politically charged and emotionally symbolic. Will changing the school's mascot or motto upset veteran teachers, parents, alumni, or the community? Reframing helps individuals see what they had once overlooked, gaining a more meaningful and holistic appreciation for what is happening, so they can respond with more versatility and effectiveness.

SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT 1.5 **Using Multiple Frames in School Improvement**

Understanding the four frames can help school leaders better recognize the varied factors that affect—and will be affected by—their decisions. Considering how each frame would both influence and respond to a proposed change can lead to more effective and successful strategies and outcomes.

1. Separate into four groups, one for each frame: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic.

2. Ask each group to consider the implications for their frame for the following scenario:

A middle school faculty is struggling with lagging student achievement. They notice that teachers are wasting about 10 minutes at the start of each class just trying to settle the students into calm, attentive behavior. Students move through the halls between classes in boisterous groups, waving and calling to friends, shouting greetings and comments, and straggling loudly into classes as the final bell rings. Frustrated and wanting students to arrive at class ready to learn, teachers and administrators decide to require all teachers to stand at their doors in the hall between classes so they can monitor student movement and reinforce appropriate, businesslike school behavior.

- What would faculty need to consider regarding each frame in order to prepare for a successful change? What key individuals or school or district roles are represented in each frame? What possible obstacles might the individuals from each frame pose? What supports from each key constituency are needed if the change is to succeed? What might the faculty need to do to gain support from key individuals representing each frame for the change proposed?
 - What might the faculty need to do to maintain support from key individuals representing each frame after the change becomes practice?
3. How can considering each of the four frames help your school design and enact effective improvement strategies?

UNDERSTANDING YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE

Seeing the nature of a school's culture is difficult. Our own personal experiences and values influence what we look at, what we perceive, and what we think they mean. Because our values and assumptions are usually implicit and second nature to us, we act as if the way things are is the way they should be. We comprehend school rituals, policies, activities, traditions, curricula, and pedagogy through the filters of our own—often unexamined—values and experiences within our particular society. As both participants and observers of the same structures and cultures, however, our perceptions are often incomplete, selective, and distorted. It is difficult to be neutral about the virtues and limitations of one's school culture or to notice those factors that hinder improvement.

Yet, for any change to be effective, it must be compatible with the school's culture. This requires analyzing the school's culture and bringing it to the administrators' and staff's consciousness—then, if needed, changing teachers' and administrators' attitudes and behaviors to re-boot the culture or to celebrate those cultural aspects which deserve attention and renewal.