

You can't fix school culture or should you?

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Globally, educational stakeholders at different levels (nationally, school communities and individual schools) are concerned with three key challenges: quality, accessibility and equality. For schools to deliver on these important aspects of 21st century education, the seamless interplay of vision, leadership and culture is indispensable. Often, school visions are ambiguous, school leadership is inadequate and school cultures are a can of worms. Hence, 70% of school reform efforts fail. Of which, 33% is due to leadership behaviour that does not support change and 39% to employee resistance.

At the heart of any school vision should be the students (without them, schools in their current form have no reason to exist), the teachers (without them, the students' passion for learning cannot be ignited), the parents (they continue the students' education outside of the school environment) and society (many schools rely on taxpayers' money). School leaders should design their vision and strategic plan based on national policy and curriculum, subsequently engaging staff around these. Leaders are also responsible for leading the change in culture (culture consists -among other things- of the sum of behaviours of individuals) that is required to achieve the vision. However, organisations in general and schools in particular are notoriously bad at doing this.

How can a culture that supports quality, accessibility and equality be created? There are two 'schools of thought'. Many policy makers and schools think culture is the culprit or the cause that needs fixing. Others believe that culture evolves from getting your "house in order". They are both right but they equally make a fundamental mistake: each school of thought sticks to its own point of view instead of combining both solutions. First, let us consider getting your house in order. Vision, strategy, structure and processes (e.g. decision on language of instruction) and systems (e.g. implementation of ICT) are all rooms in the house. These are interconnected and should be treated holistically i.e. you cannot fix two rooms and leave the

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others unattended to. Thus, fixing the house will support the evolution of your culture but it will hardly change people's behaviours. If culture itself is not dealt with as well, fixing your house may lead to staff resistance as there is very little or no feeling of competence, autonomy and relatedness – three universal markers for human well-being. As defined above, culture consists of the sum of individual behaviours. Hence, culture transformation requires change in behaviours, which necessitates altering the mind-set i.e. mental framework, beliefs and values. There are two ways to do this. Firstly, schools should drop the word consensus from their vocabulary. It does not only slow down reform efforts, but school leaders and other staff who are change averse can stop any transformation initiative by simply raising their hand. Allowing them to *agree-to-disagree* is a much better approach as it makes the individual accountable for his/her decision. If a teacher regularly *agrees-to-disagree*, he/she should look into the mirror and ask if he/she still fits the evolving culture defined by the school's vision. Secondly, schools should introduce the process of *negotiation of meaning* (NoM). NoM aims at aligning school leadership so that they speak with one voice, and at engaging staff so that they are motivated, committed, accountable and clear on what they need to do to support the strategy. NoM consists of four steps: understand, agree, commit and act. *Understand* raises the question: what is the impact of our discussions on me/my role, my department and my school. Once the impact is clearly understood, one can move to agreement. Indeed, one can only agree to something if one understands its impact. As mentioned above, the word consensus should be avoided and replaced by *agreement(-to-disagree)*. Understanding and agreement are the basis for any commitment. But a commitment without action is empty. In order to make optimal use of NoM, conceptual conflict is key. Conceptual conflict helps stimulate debate and negotiation around different mental frameworks, beliefs and values. These drive individual behaviour and, as discussed above, the sum of individual behaviour constitutes the culture of an organisation. Examples of conceptual conflict are: *you can't fix culture; our school is not free of racism; our teachers are old school; our school leaders do not focus on teacher well-being*. NoM has three further advantages. From a rational side, it helps to make informed decisions. From a relational perspective, understanding your own mental framework and beliefs and values (better) and confronting them with those of colleagues creates trust as respect grows from understanding the other person's standpoint. Finally, the feeling of competence, autonomy and relatedness is guaranteed by the process of NoM.

Although this article has mainly focused on the culture in schools and school communities, national culture also plays an important role. In countries where corruption thrives or citizen

safety is an issue, schools can be impacted. Though it may be hard for these schools to get their house in order and involve in NoM to effectuate cultural change, both are ways to protect the schools from getting influenced by negative aspects of their national culture.

In summary, the strength of a nation's economy and the vitality of its society depend on the quality of its schools. Education is the key to unlocking the golden door of freedom and helping children close the door of poverty later on in life. Quality, accessibility and equality of education will help guarantee both. But for this to happen, a school's vision, leadership and culture are paramount. School culture is too important to allow a *shooting-from-the-hip* approach. A combination of getting your house in order and fixing your culture will do the job. But this requires courageous leadership that creates trust.