Creating Collaborative Cultures

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To accelerate positive change in your school, foster a climate of working together.

In one school, teachers work together toward common goals. In another, it's every man for himself. In one school, teachers assume responsibility for every student's success. In another, they blame parents and administrators for student failure.

Good people work in all those schools, but some are more effective than others. The difference is school culture. Teachers who work in schools with strong collaborative cultures behave differently from those who depend on administrators to create the conditions of their work. In collaborative cultures, teachers exercise creative leadership together and take responsibility for helping all students learn.

When schools are under pressure to improve, they tend to abandon collaboration in favor of top-down edicts. Collaboration seems like a luxury they can no longer afford. But rising expectations call for more collaboration, not less. The ultimate success of any improvement depends on the behavior of teachers, and when good teachers work together, they support one another's journey toward better instruction. Principals who need to raise achievement are driving with the brakes on unless they build cultural norms that support faculty working together.

Collaborative cultures take the brakes off and accelerate a faculty's capacity to improve instruction. As Figure 1 suggests, when teachers have many opportunities to collaborate, their energy, creative thinking, efficiency, and goodwill increase—and the cynicism and defensiveness that hamper change decrease.

Principals can foster a school environment that leads to collaboration and teacher leadership by sharing responsibility with teachers as often as possible and by helping them develop skills that foster collaborative problem solving. As we've seen in our own practice and our years mentoring principals, collaborative cultures are guided by two overarching beliefs: transparency (meaning as little as possible is done behind closed doors) and shared decision making.

Figure 1. Collaborative vs. Top-Down Cultures	
In collaborative cultures…	**In top-down cultures…**
Teachers support one another's efforts to improve instruction.	Teachers discourage challenges to the status quo.
Teachers take responsibility for solving problems and accept the consequences of their decisions.	Teachers depend on principals to solve problems, blame others for their difficulties, and complain about the consequences of decisions.
Teachers share ideas. As one person builds on another's ideas, a new synergy develops.	Ideas and pet projects belong to individual teachers; as a result, development is limited.
Educators evaluate new ideas in light of shared goals that focus on student learning.	Ideas are limited to the "tried and true"— what has been done in the past.

Toward Collaborative Decision Making

Information is the lifeblood of any organization. Principals building a culture that supports school reform should pay attention to the ways official and unofficial information circulate through their schools. Official information includes published policies, schedules, and so on. Unofficial information includes rumors and the ways teachers relate to one another and translate official policy into classroom practice.

In collaborative cultures, official and unofficial information are similar and reinforce each other. In top-down cultures, they are dissimilar and at odds with each other.

Transparency Tips the Scale at Elmwood

During the 1990s, the faculty of Elmwood Elementary School[1] worked with the principal and assistant superintendent to develop a literacy program that reflected its deepest beliefs about the ways young students learn to read and write. The goal was to help all students in the school's diverse population develop sophisticated literacy skills and learn to love reading and writing. Elmwood's test scores rose, and the accomplishment was celebrated in the local press.

When the principal and assistant superintendent left, the district adopted a new literacy

curriculum. Although there were fundamental differences, many of the new program's goals matched the Elmwood teachers' goals and would have furthered their commitment to provide excellent literacy instruction for all. However, teachers resisted implementing the new program, and test scores began to fall.

What made the difference? In the first instance, teachers were involved in planning the literacy program, so they understood the rationale for instructional decisions and felt responsible for solving problems that inevitably arose. Problems were discussed openly and solved collaboratively; official and unofficial information about the strengths and weaknesses of the program were identical. Conversations in the teachers' lounge and the parking lot reinforced the program.

In the second instance, teachers were not involved in choosing the new literacy curriculum. As a result, they failed to see the connections between the old program and the new. They believed the administration had ignored their past experience and success.

In this climate, teachers failed to make the many small classroom adjustments that make a program work. A great deal of teacher energy was drained away by complaining. Official and unofficial information circulating about the curriculum became very contradictory, and conversations in the teachers' lounge and the parking lot undermined the program.

The more information teachers know, the more effective they become. Instead of censoring information, collaborative principals make it available to everyone. They openly discuss proposed changes and address failures as well as successes.

Taking Action for Transparency

Here are some actions that principals committed to transparency can take:

- Format information to make it user-friendly. One principal published a weekly memo for teachers. After she heeded a teacher's suggestion to put the weekly schedule (an item that demanded teachers' immediate attention) on the first page, teachers began reading the memo more widely.
- Edit your writing. Words are more effective when there are fewer of them.
- Develop guidelines for how to disseminate different kinds of information. Use e-mail and weekly memos for announcements, feedback sheets for teacher feedback, and staff meetings for topics that require dialogue.

- Explain your thinking in clear language so that even those who do not agree with decisions will understand the thinking that underlies them.
- Post charts and graphs displaying pertinent data in faculty lounges.
- Work against isolation by giving teachers opportunities to observe colleagues and engage in conversations about work in classrooms.

Unearthing Underlying Problems

Deeper factors often underlie apparently "simple" decisions. One March, the food and consumer sciences teacher told the principal of her middle school that she had depleted her budget. The teacher requested additional money from the "slush fund" so students could do a traditional, treasured cookie-baking project. The principal replied that there was no such fund and that additional money would have to come from other teachers' budgets, which the principal was unwilling to tap. The teacher said that students would be upset and stormed out of the room.

The next day, numerous parents called to complain. Apparently, the teacher had told her students of the principal's decision, and students had complained to their parents and other teachers. The issue became a schoolwide controversy. Denying extra resources seemed practical and fair to the principal.

In truth, the problem of lack of funds for cookie baking was only the tip of the iceberg. To minimize confusion and to make collaborative decisions about budgets, the principal had to get to the bottom of the deeper problem and communicate about it openly. She gathered the team leaders and department chairs. To facilitate the conversation, teachers used a tool called the iceberg (Goodman, 1997), which is designed to reveal the underlying behavior patterns, structures, and even mental assumptions beneath the immediately visible aspects of a problem—the three layers underneath the surface. (See www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el200910_kohm_iceberg.pdf for an illustration.)

The "tip of the iceberg" was the backlash created when the principal denied the consumer sciences teacher additional money. To get to the first layer beneath the surface, the group looked for patterns and trends related to this surface problem. Had other teachers in the past overspent their budgets? What had happened when they did? Did previous administrators make budget decisions without faculty input?

Unearthing the second layer involved examining structures that allowed these patterns to recur. Structures can be visible items, such as published school protocols, or less visible things, such as attitudes and informal procedures. In this case, the principal needed to probe for such information as whether every department chair had a sound budget, who was involved in developing budgets, and what processes existed to monitor them.

At the deepest level, the group explored the underlying assumptions teachers held regarding monetary resources. Did most teachers believe their budget was flexible? Did they think creating and adhering to a budget was someone else's responsibility?

The dialogue was enlightening. As the group looked frankly at how different departments handled their budgets, they realized that budget decisions affect everyone in the building. Any money added to one person's budget decreases money available for other departments or whole-school projects like purchasing library books. And, most important, they learned the necessity of sharing information. As a result of the meeting, each department contributed funds to the consumer science budget, making possible a positive learning experience for students through the end of the semester.

Sharing decisions with teachers on such key issues as resource allocation changes the culture of a school—and often leads to sounder decisions. Schedules and budgets rule teachers' everyday lives. When teachers decide together what they want to accomplish with a budget (for example, building up the library) or a schedule (devoting blocks of time to literacy) and then work together to create budgets or schedules that accomplish these goals, their on-the-ground experience informs their planning.

Developing Skills for Collaboration

Engaging teachers in collaborative problem solving requires in-depth thinking and sophisticated communication skills. A variety of tools and practices help teachers and principals develop such skills. Principals in collaborative schools help teachers gain these skills and learn to use tools that enable them to gather a variety of perspectives and to recognize the complexity involved in good decision making. And they make clear what each person's role will be ("I'm gathering as much information as I can from affected parties, but I will make the final selection" or "The faculty will vote or reach consensus after we've heard everyone's views").

Goal Setting

Principals who want to encourage collaborative leadership need to help teachers look at tough situations head on and set realistic goals together. One new principal found herself in such a situation at Johnston Elementary School. When she arrived, the neighborhood surrounding Johnston Elementary was dramatically changing. Many small, privately owned homes were being put up for rent or undergoing foreclosure. Neighborhood diversity was increasing, and more families spoke English as a second language. Meanwhile, Johnston's test scores were falling, and it had been labeled a "failing school." The recently hired superintendent was calling for significant changes in curriculum and instruction.

Far from being united and proactive, teachers were confused and angry. Older teachers felt that no one respected their past successes or the school's longtime traditions. They often blamed the changing population for their students' academic distress. Younger teachers—overwhelmed by discipline problems and the sometimes confusing new curriculum—didn't know where to turn.

As her first year drew to a close, the principal realized that she needed to help her faculty focus on new learning rather than on past inadequacies. And she sensed that when principals and teachers develop goals together, teachers become stronger and student learning accelerates.

This leader used the last staff meeting of the year to help her staff mutually agree on three or four goals for the following year. First, she distributed to teachers (a week before the meeting) a packet that included district goals, data on student achievement and discipline, and academic areas Johnston needed to address. She extended the meeting time and included dinner to provide time to complete the goal-setting process.

The group used the focusing four model developed by Garmston and Wellman (2002) to guide the conversation. The process encourages widespread teacher participation by having teachers go through four steps: brainstorm, clarify, advocate, and canvass. Johnston's teachers were able to reach consensus on four goals within two hours. These goals (improving instruction in reading, improving instruction in math, motivating students, and increasing parent involvement) mirrored the goals the district had established. By going through the goal-setting process themselves, however, the faculty began to own the goals. Because the process was public, teachers realized there

were no hidden agendas. The resistance that had slowed down progress in an already difficult situation began to melt away.

When Johnston's teachers met again at the end of the summer, they fashioned action plans, assigned responsibilities, and developed criteria for measuring the effects of their efforts. During the next year, the principal and her leadership team organized staff meetings around discussions of the four goals. Data reports and conversations focused on progress toward these aims. Progress during the following year was slow but steady and was no longer hampered by the foot dragging and negativism that had slowed Johnston's progress the year before.

Mutually developed goals focus a faculty's energy. As consultants, we often ask principals how their school developed its goals and how teachers use them. How schools develop goals reveals a great deal about their culture. Principals who develop collaborative cultures shift from being the person who *sets* the goals to being the person who *sets up the conditions* that allow others to establish goals. They do so by

- Gathering relevant data and making that data accessible to teachers.
- Convening groups of teachers and

organizing meetings in a way that ensures every voice is heard.

- Ensuring that meetings result in clear, specific, written goals and action plans for achieving them.
- Making certain that goals and action plans are specific and realistic enough to be effective.
- Measuring progress toward goals throughout the year.

Modeling Productive Meetings

At Oceanside School District, a knowledgeable superintendent modeled how to make meetings fruitful. Oceanside had a history of academic excellence and community pride. Teachers and administrators thought of colleagues as family and held tradition in high esteem. But familiarity and tradition blinded staff to how the needs of their student population had changed. Oceanside, once a leading district, was now failing to meet the state's academic standards.

Oceanside held monthly administrative meetings for principals. Because everyone knew one another well and the culture was well established, no one saw a need for detailed agendas or protocols. But productivity at meetings had deteriorated. People came late,

avoided contentious issues for fear of upsetting friends, and gave pat answers to hard questions.

When the decrease in student achievement became obvious, the superintendent took action. She realized her administrators needed tools that would help them ask hard questions or advocate for opposing ideas without making valued colleagues feel as if they were being criticized. She introduced the following two meeting protocols, among others. She knew these protocols would engage meeting participants, focus their attention, and model strategies that would help principals facilitate the necessary difficult conversations back at their schools.

- **Check-in**. This involves taking a few minutes at the beginning of a meeting to give everyone an opportunity to ease into conversation by responding to short prompts such as, What good news do you have to share? or What's on your mind that might distract you in the meeting? The prompt might even relate to a topic on the agenda. It's important that everyone speaks and that they focus their attention on a common question. Check-in prodded participants to come on time and met their need to be seen and heard.

- **Dialogue**. The key to dialogue is to avoid judgment and make the thinking of both the speaker and the listener clear. The superintendent modeled inquiry stems that demonstrate powerful language for questioning, such as, Can you help me understand your thinking about…? (a nonaggressive opener) or How does this relate to your other concerns? (language that probes for significance). She modeled advocacy stems to use when stating individual beliefs, such as, Here's what I believe about … Such language furthers shared communication because each speaker carefully describes underlying thoughts and feelings (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994).

The superintendent and another administrator role-played using these stems in a dialogue about a controversial curriculum decision; administrators then practiced in pairs. Eventually, dialoguing became standard practice at monthly meetings. The principals realized that if they didn't reflect on how they framed questions and stated beliefs, they could unknowingly sabotage conversation among teachers—and even the whole collaborative process.

With, Not To

Collaborative cultures build the confidence teachers need to lead. When administrators identify problems and dictate solutions, teachers see problems as somebody else's fault and solutions as somebody else's responsibility. Collaborative decision making strengthens everyone's ability to set and meet high standards. Reform should be something done *with* teachers, not *to* them.

References

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Endnote

1 All school and district names are pseudonyms.

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