



Constructing Your Ship

Three Keys to Redemptive School Culture

By Jay Ferguson

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast." This maxim, commonly attributed to 20th-century management guru Peter Drucker, conveys an important truth about school leadership. Though we certainly should not dispense with strategy altogether, culture is often neglected. As heads of school and school leaders, we frequently spend so much time deciding where our ship should go, how long it should take us to sail there, how much money we should spend getting there, and how we are going to come up with the money ... that we forget to pay attention to how our ship is built.

David Livermore defines business culture as distinct values, norms, and ways of viewing people and issues. Quite simply, it is "the way we do and see things around here." In the schoolhouse, a great school culture may be the most important ingredient to a healthy, thriving school. It is the medium in which great education happens. Renowned Christian educator Nicholas Wolterstorff has said Christian schools should pray for and build cultures characterized by *shalom*: harmony and delight in all one's relationships, be they with God, other human beings, culture, nature, or oneself. In our school, we call it "redemptive community." Not only does

a redemptive community create a hothouse for profound learning, but it is itself an act of worship of our Lord, glorifying God and bearing witness to His presence in the world.

When culture happens by default, it is usually toxic, reflecting the broken world we live in. Culture must be prayed over, thought through, and fought for. Designing and overseeing the culture of the school is the non-delegable responsibility of the head of school or building principal. Peter Senge likens modern-day leaders more to ship *architects* than to captains. As architect, the head is the chief cultural officer of the school, the one tasked with monitoring the culture's *clarity, communication, and consistency*.

Clarity

Clarity means everyone in your school is absolutely clear on the school's mission and values; without it, the culture is incoherent. How does the gospel play out in the school from day to day? Everything rises and falls on leadership, so clarity must begin with the board, head, and leadership team. There cannot be any conscious or unconscious disagreement among leaders about the mission, values, and ideals. In *The Advantage*, addressing the power of

organizational health, Patrick Lencioni offers six critical questions to help create clarity among one's leadership team. The exercise isn't over until the answers to all six are unanimous.

- Why do we exist?
- How do we behave?
- What do we do?
- How will we succeed?
- What is most important, right now?
- Who must do what?

From this process, our team determined that our mission and values boil down to one core purpose: our school exists to “teach Jesus.” As we explore and discuss what “teaching Jesus” looks like in the context of conducting discipline, designing curriculum, carrying out a counter-cultural athletic program, communicating with our current and prospective families, and developing our financial policies and procedures—to name but a few areas—we strengthen the shape of our school's culture. We write our findings in a culture document, and get agreement from our board and faculty that these things really do characterize who we are; they are not just aspirational, but actual. If we identify areas where we need to “teach Jesus” better, we talk about how to do so, and set goals to bring it about. Through this process, we gain clarity over what we are and what we want to be. As we figure out what “teaching Jesus” looks like in all contexts, a blueprint for redemptive community begins to take shape.

Communication

Verbal, incarnational communication becomes indispensable once your mission, values, and practices are clear. Talking about the culture of the school (through newsletters, e-mail, forums with students and school families, and in every other touch-point with current, former, and prospective school families) helps stakeholders connect what they see in the life of the school to what leaders say is important. At our school, we use our new-parent orientation, new-teacher orientation, Meet the Teacher night, my blog, the school blog, the school newsletter, campus newsletter, and our website as opportunities to communicate what it means to teach Jesus and be a redemptive community. We try to define these things in the context of whatever we are currently discussing, what families should expect to see from the school, and the responsibility of community members to live out these values.

While verbal communication is important, actions matter far more. How leaders and faculty members make decisions each day must be consistent with the culture. At our school, redemptive community means we solve problems with more of a relational than rules-based approach. We certainly have rules, but we will not let rigid application of a rule work an injustice in a particular situation, and we will not adopt a broad rule to address

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what really needs to be handled interpersonally. We strive to operate in a high-trust environment, thinking the best of each other and giving each other the benefit of the doubt. We will empower people to do their jobs, support them, then get out of their way, giving them the freedom to innovate and come up with new ideas, and create space for compassion, prayer, and pouring into each other's lives. These are a few examples of how values can play out in daily life.

The head of school and the leadership team have to live these ideals out more than anyone. In fact, a head of school should be the living embodiment of the school culture. Heads best demonstrate cultural leadership not in grand sweeping gestures, but in small daily acts. If servant leadership is part of your school's culture, how close to the building do you park your car? If wise stewardship over resources is important, do you walk by a piece of trash on the ground or stoop over to pick it up? If redemptive community is important, are you the one visiting the hospital? helping replace the single mother's water heater? quietly covering the cost so the struggling family's son can go on the class trip?

As you go, so goes the school. Incarnational cultural leadership is exhausting and impossible, unless it emanates from a heart that is broken and contrite before the Lord and completely yielded daily to the transformational power of the Holy Spirit.



Consistency

Clarity and communication mean nothing without consistency. It is easy to spout platitudes and aspirational statements from the front of the room—people expect it from Christian school leaders and faculty members. The challenge comes when living out the school culture means terminating a faculty member who is loved by parents and students but divisive among the faculty, or turning down a donation for a designated gift that is inconsistent with school culture, or—most difficult, but perhaps most powerful—seeking forgiveness publicly when we inevitably fail to live out our values. These are the moments that test a school's commitment to its culture.

There will be conflict, perhaps frequently, when your school norms clash with prevailing cultural norms. In our athletics programs, “teaching Jesus” can mean emphasizing discipleship over winning and the team over the individual. This philosophy runs counter to the “my child is a prodigy” culture. When conflict occurs, clarity about our mission and values, clear communication, and a resolute, prayerful spirit are important in engaging families over these issues. In most cases, stakeholders appreciate schools standing for something. Often, Spirit cries out to spirit, and truth and love prevail.

Building a transcendent culture is nothing new. In the waning days of the American Revolution, the fledgling nation faced a crisis. Continental Army officers, victorious over the British, had gone unpaid for months by a bankrupt Congress with no power to levy or tax. Unable to feed their families, officers chafed to see the rest of the American economy expanding, even as the citizens who seemed to be growing wealthier at their expense began voicing


concern that Washington would take his victorious army, march on Congress, and establish a military dictatorship. Washington began to hear rumblings among his officers threatening this very thing.

The conspiracy culminated at Newburgh, where, as the officers gathered, Washington stood to speak. He reminded them of how bravely and desperately they had fought for freedom, the “Glorious Cause” for which their brothers had given their lives. He urged them not to stray from the ideals of popular government, and to keep faith in Congress.

As Washington tried to read a letter from a member of Congress assuring them of payment, he paused and strained. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a new pair of spectacles. “Gentlemen,” he said as he put on the spectacles, “you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service, and now find myself growing blind.” The conspiracy dissolved in a moment.

Washington had built a culture of commitment, suffering, and sacrifice for the Glorious Cause. He built it, and he lived it. Despite his officers’ empty bellies and heavy hearts, the power of a deeply ingrained culture held the course. How much more can our schools, designed with intentional, vibrant cultures empowered by the Spirit of the Living God, become powerful conduits for life transformation and worship?

Jay Ferguson, J.D., MEd, is the headmaster of Grace Community School, Tyler, Texas. He practiced law for 10 years and, in 2002, joined Grace as development director before assuming the headmaster role in 2003. He has written extensively on Christian education and training children, including his weekly blog, *The Head and the Heart*.



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