

Project Title: Creating Change through Re-building Culture

Rick Burslem, Headmaster

Lexington Christian Academy, Lexington, KY

Background

The headmaster or CEO, as that acronym implies, is generally viewed in three ways: the chief educational officer, chief entrepreneurial officer, and chief executive officer. For Christian schools a fourth must be added, that being the chief spiritual officer. Each of these roles creates a framework by which he/she operates both strategically and operationally, then collectively provides for the warp and woof of a school. Yet, all of these functions are superintended within an underlying primary role engendered by all who lead, that of the CCO, or chief culture officer. A healthy and whole school culture is paramount to achieving holistic institutional success and, while a headmaster may be administratively effective in each of the classic roles mentioned above, the true essence of a school and how well it functions is defined by its culture.

Call culture then, the synergistic combination of each of those functions. It is both derivative and manufactured. Each of the individual roles fulfilled by a school head are but one gear or a cog in the machinery of a school's external functioning, yet the key to success is being able to connect each of these functions into a relational framework that provides meaning and significance for all of the stakeholders. Every interaction, every idea and its execution, its missional *raison d'être*, and the growth of all those within the boundaries of the school combine to frame its culture.

Culture is not a problem that needs to be solved, but rather a framework that a group can use to solve problems; it is how we learn to survive, one generation passing down what it has learned to the next. "Culture is essentially a social indoctrination of unwritten rules that people learn as they try to fit in a particular group. It's also been referred to at different times as any of the following: The social glue that holds people together, "The way we do things around here", Activity behind the scenes or between the lines, What's really going on, The patterns of behavior that distinguish us from them, An invisible force-field that limits actions and thoughts A set of behaviors that seem strange to new employees Deeply embedded beliefs and assumptions, The unwritten rules, Software for the mind, A home-court feeling, The default mode of behavior, Covert assimilation (that feels like accommodation), A collective consciousness, Shared social reflexes, The "box" that we try to think outside of, Proof that organizations can learn, A code honored by members, A latent system of authority. (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015)

Experientially, I have had the opportunity to serve as head for schools in a variety of states: one as founding head of a school that grew to 700 in three years, one successfully turned around financially, and yet another requiring significant academic enhancement. Most recently I was asked to take on the headship of a school with declining enrollment and morale amongst faculty and students considered average to poor. In each of these schools, while I have made a variety of changes and have operated in the typical roles delineated in the first paragraph, I have principally come in with the primary goal of changing the school's culture. I view culture as the software of an organization. All of the "code" is written over time and its chief programmer is the headmaster as he/she allows what is to be written, not just on the walls as represented by the mission statement placed strategically for all to see, but by what actually happens in the halls and in conversations behind closed doors. As a head of school I must reach into the components and create a new way of thinking and acting - the essence of its code or, as Grunert would say of culture, "the way we do things around here." The headmaster becomes the chief programmer by which all of the organization is run. Data, its history, the events, the experiences, and the morale are all interpreted through the cultural lens.

What did I do?

In November 2014 I was offered the position of incoming head of school for Lexington Christian Academy (LCA) beginning June 2015 and had the opportunity to transition and join the staff January 2015, enabling time to learn about the school, its history, and to be a part of the changeover. Transition from a long standing head of school to a new regime is obviously fraught with mixed loyalties, entrenched methods, and staff in a "wait and see" mode of thinking. The previous LCA head of school had served in that position since 1996, when the school was being housed in six churches. In 1998 the school purchased prime real estate with completion of all facets and phases of the main campus in 2007/08, with the school now housed there with some additional elementary sections housed in one remaining church. The enrollment history has been both remarkable and telling. From its inception, it grew from 30 students in 1985 to its highest enrollment of 1689 in 2006. The population has been in a slow decline ever since, with 1449 students enrolled for the 2014-15 academic year and an approximate enrollment of 1400 students for the start of the 2015-16 academic year. This decline has been attributed to, in part, the national economic downturn, "but more so from a strong sense of students and parents feeling disenfranchised from the school and its mission." (Admissions Director) At the onset of the Fall

2014 school year, for example, 30 students decided to leave the incoming freshmen class and enroll elsewhere just a week prior to school's start. Cited by the Admissions Director, "It was too easy to leave."

With my hire, the board's goal was for me to come in "to get to know the school and the school to get to know me." From the first day in January of this year until now I have met with all 189 staff members, many groups of parents, local pastors, previous board members, and over 100 students. In the group meetings of the staff, I would start off by asking the following questions: 1) Tell me what you love about the school and, 2) As incoming head, what advice would you give me? Often, the latter question would then be the starting point of real conversation. From all of my meetings I journaled responses, consuming two notebooks with their comments. In one sense, I was able to develop a cultural report card from the following areas: staff, key leaders, students, and parents.

Staff Meetings:

Four prevalent themes emerged from the staff:

- 1) They are dedicated educators, yet eager and desirous to be led. They want strong, positive leadership.
- 2) There is a culture of fear. When asked why, there were many answers but for the staff one issue was central - job security. This was generated by staff being let go and very intrusive board management. Comments were made about the board that "if you got a board member on your case, you were gone." There was little or no trust in the upper level administration known as the CBO or Central Business Office personnel. With my arrival the staff had a wait and see approach but were honest with me regarding their feelings. People expressed hope but only wistfully.
- 3) While the teachers had a lot of good ideas, recent budget cuts and a lack of confidence in feeling that their ideas made any difference caused the staff to "stay to their own business." Freedom to express one's thoughts was not necessarily welcomed. Two key leaders were seen as the "elephant in the room" and any discussions about them were veiled in carefully chosen wording. While a few were direct and voiced that they should go, many were at least respectful of their service to the school.

- 4) In the individual meetings with the department heads, similar feelings were expressed regarding fear in the staff, frustration with the approval process that the staff had to go through for textbook selections and any curricular changes. One department head indicated that the current educational committee structure de-incentivized creativity and made them feel puerile in regard to requests. They questioned why non-educators and parents were making decisions for the academic components of the school. The feeling tone that has been created is you “stay below the radar.”

Key Staff that met in the “Batcave”

There was a key group of staff who felt the strong burden to “hold the school together.” This group consisted of two new hires - the athletic director (hired in the fall of 2014) and technology director (new as of two years), a volunteer parent who was recently offered the position of advancement director and the admissions director who has been on staff since 2005. The first week that I was on the campus, I asked the question, “What is the elephant in the room?”

The response that I was given was somewhat indirect and they proceeded to tell me that they would meet in “secret” and called it the “batcave meetings”. They would plan together to see how they could insert “fun” and begin to meet the urgency felt by all that a sense of community was desperately needed. They had been meeting since October and would also use that time to encourage one another.

For the admissions director, this was her “safe place” and it gave her hope. She collects all of the survey information from parents and staff and she is able to collate and highlight the critical data. She shared that data with me.

Student Meetings

In my meetings with students I heard these comments:

“They are waiting for us to do something wrong”

“We could have a good chapel but the minute we come out of the chapel and our shirt is hanging out we would get in trouble.”

“They want us to succeed but it seems like we have become a prep school”

“The teachers talk about us behind our backs, what type of role model is that?”

I certainly had very good comments as well. Most of the students had a strong sense that the teachers cared and that they wanted them to learn. Yet there was an underlying theme that kept emerging indicating a lack of connectedness. Christianity was a set of rules, of dos and don'ts, and the students learned how to "fake it to make it". Community was sport specific and grade level interaction was spontaneously generated by students and their parents. The school did not appear to be intentional with cultivating a strong community. Service projects were cited as fun and community building. These activities brought school unity more into play than chapel. Students knew that this was an excellent college preparatory school and were satisfied enough to make it their school. They did not have much expectation beyond that, however.

Parent Meetings

The purpose of the parent meetings was twofold: those who were "on the way out" and were not reenrolling their students and new parents.

Themes that emerged from the parent meetings:

- 1) The current head stays in his office and has no relationship with the students, parents or staff.
- 2) The headmaster "hides" behind the board to do his business. There is confusion as to who is really in charge, the board or the headmaster.
- 3) The teachers talk and unfortunately let the students know how unhappy they are.
- 4) Their student does not really care anymore. The student culture is not very healthy. The only reason that they would stay is the good academics to get into college but the lack of authentic Christianity has made it difficult for them to see the value of the school. They felt they could do better in a public school because at least there is no expectation for there to be anything close to respect for Christianity. That was a better option for the parents because there were no expectations in the public school.
- 5) If you do not fit the mold, you have to learn how to fit in and that takes effort. There are parents who are part of the inner circle and once you are selected there are no other opportunities to be able to be a part of the school with the exception of sports.

Alumni Meetings/Discussions

In my meetings with various alumni and representatives these themes were proffered:

- 1) “All they want is money.”
- 2) While there is appreciation for the teachers, there is little respect for the administration.
- 3) The headmaster has never reached out, why should we?

Essentially the alumni organization barely exists. If there are any gatherings, they are put together by individuals who live in the area or who have sustained relationships since graduation. Many of the alumni who now have children of school age will not consider LCA because of embittered feelings that is “shared” amongst the alumni.

Plan of Action

My plan of action was to immediately create a sense that relationships matter, communicate that teachers have permission and are encouraged to vocalize their concerns, and that students have a voice. Specifically, I met with all of the constituents, one on one. When changes occurred, I met with the whole staff and informed them of the changes. Apparently that was seldom done. I also created a Faculty Council, where I have appointed one lead teacher to create a committee of staff Pk-12 to function as a “bridge builder of communication.” My goal was to send a signal to the staff that their opinions mattered and were going to be heard. Their first task is to work collectively on the staff evaluation schemes and create a consistency of evaluation criteria. That will be accomplished this summer.

As stated above in the parent meetings, there was a feeling of not being a part of the community and there was no way to enter into the “inner circle.” The structure of the PTA, or parent groups, made it difficult to be involved and was perceived to be very exclusive. As a result, I disbanded the current PTA association and created what is now called the PRIDE committee, which is organized to engage and include more parents. At our inaugural meeting, 100 parents came and signed up for the 16 committees, ranging from spiritual life to helping with fund raising.

Based on the data that I collected from the students and their parents, I started with the junior class and held three pancake breakfasts. That caught on and the other classes requested one as well. The juniors also had some goals for the school and I gave them audience and met with many students over the 4 month period. Roughly 30 students and I will be going on a pre-senior camping

trip in the second week in June. The intent of that time is start building the thoughts and actions toward their senior year. Additionally, the students have thought about creating an honor code for the school and would like to make it part of their legacy.

What did I learn?

Relationships are the key.

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community. (Barth, 2006)

I sent this quote around to the whole staff in the latter part of April. At that point I had met with the current high school principal to let him know that he would not be receiving a contract. When I met with the middle and high school staff, I let them know that he will not be coming back and proceeded to explain the succession plan. In the aftermath of that meeting one staff member thanked me for informing them. Holding a meeting like that was never done in her experience as a faculty; she had been there 7 years.

When I made another key staff move, I called a meeting of the staff and talked about trust and that I would, “never ask them to trust me without first building their confidence in the decisions that are made and how they were made.” I also indicated that I would not be able to fully discuss why but expressed that as staff members in this community, they deserved to have the information as a point of honoring them. Baine and Covey recommend building a culture of trust that you talk straight, tell the truth which creates a culture of transparency, and leave the right impression of respect for them. At that meeting, I indicated that trust is built when we communicate together about building a culture of growth. I read the quote from Barth and said we have work to do in building and believing again about why we are at LCA, which is to build the students’ lives for the kingdom.

The school has been starved for a lack of relationship with their leader. The staff, as already noted, were managing their sense of insecurity and at the same time their love for the students. There was a strong sense of isolationism and “don’t ask, don’t tell”. Using the software metaphor

once again, the only way to extricate that type of “code” is to spend time and validate each person’s giftedness and thoughts. According to Grunert, “If you want to bust a culture...Ask people to explain the elephant in the room.” I allowed a lot of elephants to come into my office. They smelled but I operated according to the ownership principle. Simply stated, if something is wrong, even a small percent, own it 100 percent. I took ownership of the school’s “program.”

In the last meeting of the year, I expressed that we need to examine our worship as that which serves Christ and one another. Two Greek words were used: proskuneuo and latreuo. Each word means worship and, together, they make up 87 occurrences in the New Testament expressed in the transliteration of worship and service. The former means to totally surrender as a form of adoration and respect. The latter means to serve with all of one’s heart for the betterment of the other. In my closing, I stated all that we do is an act of worship and if we understand that, our school will change. Someone came up to me and indicated in 20+ years that he has been on staff, the head of school has never given a devotion and they had never worshipped together as a staff. Relationships are vital and purposeful interactions as a community are essential.

Pouring capacity into an organization is one of the roles of the leader. The pancake breakfasts, the various meetings, the time that I shared my testimony in chapel, the meetings with students including going camping with 30 + students is necessary to create a “reset and restore” to the organization. LCA is an excellent school with an average ACT of 26.3, many students serving God, and a long history of college preparedness. What I am doing is causing people to believe again.

What difference is it making in your school?

One critical target that I had was to improve the re-enrollment in the high school. As stated in the early part of this paper, 30 students left right before the start of the last school year. The high school is now showing 93% overall re-enrollment in the high school, with a 95% rate in the class that had a mass exodus. I chose to teach an 8th grade Bible class for the last 5 weeks of the semester. I had two reasons. First, I love teaching the Bible and 8th grade students. Second, I wanted them to imprint on me as their headmaster and to be known as a person who cares. I had a goal to make sure that the transition from the 8th to 9th in terms of re-enrollment was very high. The re-enrollment rate for that class was very high.

Creating Change through Re-building Culture

In meeting with students and their parents, my goal was to prove to them that relationships matter and that I care for their student. The feeling tone from the admissions director is there is a marked increase of good will and excitement in comparison to last year. While there has been a small decline in enrollment in the lower school, we have developed a plan to correct. The parents are indicating their support in many ways verbally but mostly by their vote of confidence in the school in re-enrollment and in committee involvement. Relationships matter.

As CEO, and as the CCO, my role is to continue to build relationships within the school community. The impact will hopefully overflow into all areas, including fundraising, enrollment, board relations, and the overall community, both internal and external. Borrowing from a quote from John Maxwell about people and leading them, “They do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Works Cited

Baines, Gareth F.; Covey, Stephen M. R.; Merrill, Rebecca R. (2014-09-07). The Topline Summary of Stephen M.R. Covey and Rebecca Merrill's The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything (Topline Summaries) (Kindle Location 187). BB Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Barth, Roland “Improving Relationships Within the Schoolhouse,” Educational Leadership, Vol. 63, No. 6 (March 2006), p. 9.

Gruenert, Steve; Whitaker, Todd. “School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It”. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development. Kindle Edition. (January, 2015) (Kindle Locations 72-77 and 236).