

Project Title: Creating Change through Re-building Culture

Rick Burslem, Headmaster

Lexington Christian Academy, Lexington, Kentucky

Project 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 those functions are superintended within an underlying primary role engendered by all who lead, that of the CCO, or the 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.

Every interaction, every idea and its execution, its missional raison d'être, and the growth of all those within the boundaries of the school make up culture. Coming into a new situation at Lexington Christian Academy (LCA), where enrollment is on a decline and the student and staff morale is poor, I find myself taking on the CCO (Chief Culture Officer) role more intentionally than the other roles. Culture is the software of an organization; it is "how we do things around here." As a "programmer" for a new culture, my focus has been on building relationships and trust, the core elements of what will be LCA's new culture. Roland Barth states it well, "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."

Strategic Action

The LCA board asked me to start the transition in January 2015, "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 of the 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. I was performing a culture audit.

From that data I then focused on building trust by spending time with all of the constituents and by listening and affirming each person's thoughts and ideas. Additionally being visible and clear with communication helped to reset people's expectations of the administration. Having 5 pancake breakfasts with the student body helped as well!

Professional Discovery

People matter and want to be involved in the community where they work. Heretofore, they had experienced little or no interaction with the head of school. To change culture one must do so one person at a time. While letters and other forms of communication matter, they pale in comparison to the high touch afforded with time spent in discussions that matter to the staff. Little things make a difference. Time equates to respect for a person and timely communication that is braced with integrity accelerates the speed of trust gained.

Positive Outcomes

While the re-enrollment percentage has been decreasing over time, this year in the high school it achieved 93%. The staff, students and parents are excited about the changes. Now is the time to make sure that the new software of our organization runs well and continues to effect students positively for the Kingdom of God; body, mind, soul and spirit.