Four

The School Culture Framework: Creating a Culture of Collaboration

Frameworks help us understand how abstract ideas interact with one another and make things that are difficult to describe more rational and more easily analyzed. In an attempt to better understand what makes schools toxic and healthy and how we can develop schools into positive learning environments, we use a framework described in depth in the book *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division* (Muhammad, 2009). The framework described in this chapter identifies the groups of educators within a school who jockey for the control of the collective norms and expectations within the school culture. They operate within two distinct spheres, greatly impacting the will of the school and its level of health or toxicity.

The goal of this chapter is to help educators understand how to create a culture of collaboration. A collaborative culture is one in which members of a school community "work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals*—goals linked to the purpose of learning for all—for which members are held *mutually accountable*" (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 15). We want to explore how a school can transition from a vision of learning for all into the practical application of that vision. This process starts first with recognition of what creates disunity and what needs to be done to foster unity.

The Players

In a typical school culture, staff members fit into one of four categories: Believers, Tweeners, Survivors, and Fundamentalists. These players in school culture have the power to influence one another in both positive and negative ways and have differing agendas that affect their behavior in unique ways. When not properly cultivated, these diverse agendas can lead to division and dysfunction—a toxic school culture in which no one possesses the will to lead students or their colleagues.

Believers are educators who are predisposed to the ideas and programs that support the egalitarian idealism of education. They use and seek out the best professional models to support the universal achievement of their students.

Tweeners are educators who are new to school culture. They are typically teachers who have just completed their education or certification or who are new to a particular school. They do not belong to one of the other three categories yet—they will usually "choose sides" within two to five years. This group is critical to school improvement because schools—especially high-risk schools—want to retain them. If schools do not retain qualified staff members, school reform is nearly impossible because long-term initiatives die out without organizational memory.

Survivors are educators with one purpose: survival. This group is made up of professionals who are simply "burned out" and so overwhelmed by the demands of the profession that they suffer from depression and merely survive from day to day. This group is much smaller than the other three, and there is a general consensus that this group needs more help than what is available in most schools and districts. They seek no alliances with other staff members and need the help of medical and psychological professionals to heal from the psychological effects of burnout.

Fundamentalists are educators who are comfortable with the status quo and organize and work against any viable form of change. Their goal is to be left alone. They have many tools that they use to thwart reform initiatives, and without the proper leadership, they are generally successful in that subversion. Fundamentalists

see their personal needs and goals as more important than the needs of the students and the organization as a whole.

The interaction of these complex groups of individuals makes school reform difficult at best. School leaders must be disciplined and persistent to focus school professionals on the singular goal of success for all students. This is the critical piece in transforming the will of a school staff from low to high. We focus specifically on the interaction between the Believers and Fundamentalists because their influence most directly affects the health or toxicity of a school culture.

Believers and Fundamentalists

We've already established that researchers agree that high-performing schools have clear goals and high expectations for all students (DuFour et al., 2008; Petrides & Nodine, 2005; Reeves, 2000), which are found in healthy cultures. The critical question is, How do schools develop healthy cultures, and how do they continue to evolve without spiraling into toxic cultures? We argue that in order to accomplish this goal, schools must increase the number of Believers and increase their influence while reducing the number of Fundamentalists and neutralizing their effects on school culture.

An analysis of the behavior of Believers and Fundamentalists reveals a difference in philosophy and agendas that drive their behavior. Jim Collins, in his breakthrough book *Good to Great* (2001), identifies why great companies and organizations consistently outperform average or low-performing companies and organizations. He describes great organizations as having three strengths:

- Disciplined people
- Disciplined thought
- Disciplined action

When examining the issue of disciplined people, Collins writes:

> We expected that good-to-great leaders would begin by setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off

> the bus, and right people in the right seats—and then they
> figured out where to drive it. The old adage "People are your
> most important asset" turns out to be wrong. People are not
> your most important asset. The right people are. (p. 12)

People and their commitment, focus, attitudes, and behaviors
have to be aligned with the organizational objectives, or prog-
ress is nearly impossible. We do not subscribe to Collins's notion
that there is a "right" person or "wrong" person. We believe that
people are not innately or inherently right or wrong for a job.
Their personal and professional experiences can shape their
readiness to produce as much as their inherent ability, so leaders
can cultivate and develop staff members' abilities and productiv-
ity to greater levels.

Those who display productive organizational behavior are the
Believers, and those who display unproductive behavior are the
Fundamentalists. It is this behavior that affects the will of the
school, educators' ability to lead, whether a school culture is healthy
or toxic, and, ultimately, whether the learning environment is a pos-
itive one in which students can succeed.

Believers know that their role is to help the organization achieve
its objective—success for every student. Their focus on that objec-
tive guides their behavior, so constructive feedback does not spark
a defensive response in them. They want to be prepared instead of
in control. Simply stated, the organizational goal supersedes their
individual goals. They are on the bus, in the right seats, and ready
to lend their gifts and talents to confront obstacles and achieve col-
lective success. A Believer is a true team player; a "we first" rather
than a "me first" professional. If every educator behaved this way,
research-based practices would be implemented with fidelity, and
we would see the student achievement results that we crave.

Fundamentalists believe that their personal agenda is more
important than the collective agenda. Protecting their personal
and political issues becomes more important than the needs of
the students they serve. They play political games and lobby other
members of the organization to buttress their power base, and
any reform efforts that are in conflict with their personal needs or

desires become the object of their destruction. Fundamentalists lobby for issues like professional autonomy (especially in curriculum and assessment), professional ease, and work benefits like salary or extra benefits, for example. They lobby against complex tasks (even when they benefit students), changes to systems, and changes to protocol (like grading systems, parent contact protocol, and class size). A Fundamentalist is a "me first" and "we second" employee.

John Wooden, the late and legendary basketball coach at UCLA, was asked about what it takes to be a good team player. His response was to "consider the rights of others before your own feelings, and the feelings of others before your own rights" (Orr, 2009). Schools are teams of educators with the goal of educating every child. Selfishness and a focus on personal agendas are harmful to accomplishing that collective goal. Unfortunately, Fundamentalists have been allowed to hijack the focus, energy, and commitment in many schools within our school system. Fundamentalism and healthy cultures cannot coexist.

We advocate that leaders target these staff members in their efforts to build a collective will within the school because these team members are the source of the toxicity. Transforming the toxic behavior into better and more productive behavior is the focus of chapter 5.

The behavior of Believers, Fundamentalists, and all school professionals occurs within two distinct cultures: the collegial culture and the managerial culture.

Collegial and Managerial Cultures

Schools are complex organizations with many layers of human interaction. Education professionals wear many hats—sometimes they make decisions that affect others, and sometimes they are affected by the decisions and actions of others. This occurs within two distinct cultures of the school system: the collegial culture and the managerial culture. Breaking down the barriers between these two parts of school operation is paramount in the development of healthy school cultures.

Collegial Culture

The *collegial culture*, or informal culture, refers to the regular, informal interactions that professionals have with their peers. While engaged in this part of the organization, people tend to feel more comfortable with authentic communication because of perceived shared norms and the lack of a person who holds authority over the group. Membership is exclusive to those sharing similar rank and philosophy. Changing rank or philosophy may risk a person's membership in this group. The collegial culture is by far the most powerful part of the organization. This is the place where educators form covert alliances and lobby for their agendas. Everyone in a school or school system belongs to a collegial culture, and the health of this part of the organization is critical to creating a healthy culture.

It is not surprising that this group exists. Groups of people who come together regularly start to organize patterns of acceptable behavior—a series of norms and values. Over time these understandings become a framework—a guide for what it means to be a member of the group. The framework, once accepted by the group, becomes a requirement for membership and defines acceptable behavior within the group. It becomes the group's culture. People who are new to the group watch for clues on how to act (Goffman, 1959).

Lobbying takes place within the collegial culture, and it can be very dangerous to a healthy school culture, damaging the will of a staff. *Lobbyists* act on behalf of a group, trying to persuade others to support certain initiatives. Fundamentalists are the most active and effective lobbyists in a school culture, especially in the collegial culture. Conversely, Believers generally choose to isolate themselves instead of becoming actively involved in influencing the thinking and behavior of their colleagues. If a school hopes to have a healthy culture, Believers have to be more active lobbyists in the collegial culture.

Fundamentalists are very adept at rallying others to support agendas of personal interest to them, even though these agendas may not be in the best interest of students or the organization. This lobbying takes place informally in places like the teachers'

lounge and parking lots and at informal gatherings. Formally, it takes place within unions and boards of education and as policy-makers leverage their influence to create adult-friendly legislation around issues such as funding and student accountability. This formal and informal lobbying has led some within the public to have negative perceptions about educators, that teachers are more concerned with their own agendas than with helping children achieve success.

Communication in the Collegial Culture

Collegial cultures have a communication system. Leaders who can access and influence this communication system are a great asset in transforming a school culture. The communication among members of a healthy collegial culture is very different from communication in a toxic culture. As we have previously noted, educators in a toxic culture develop a language of complaint. In these cultures, staff members share common criticisms of their work environment and consistently reinforce those criticisms in their communications. They consistently seek one another in informal situations to vent about their recent frustrations, which makes them feel validated, but does nothing to solve the problem. Healthy collegial cultures, on the other hand, develop a culture of problem solving. Members recognize that their commitment to organizational success demands that they utilize their informal communication system to build capacity rather than soothe egos (Muhammad, 2006).

A problem-solving culture expresses the understanding that problems will always exist—it's how we process and react to those problems that matters. When faced with the most daunting challenges, such as low test scores, student discipline problems, and combative parents, the educators in a healthy collegial culture display an unusual calm that allows them to analyze the problem, hypothesize ways to handle it, and develop possible solutions to eliminate it. Healthy school cultures have a coolness that is very easily observed (Cromwell, 2002). Members of these cultures do get tired, angry, and even frustrated, but their resolve does not change. If you were to listen in on the conversations in a group of educators

in a healthy collegial culture as they face a challenging situation, you might hear the following phrases:

- Why do you think we had an increase in student failure in math?

- What do we need to do to address this issue?

- Which teachers had a high level of success in this area? Are they willing to share their strategies?

- Who needs to get involved to solve this problem?

Just as healthy collegial cultures have a distinct style of communication, so do toxic cultures. A toxic culture's language is rooted in frustration and emotion and assigns blame for problems to external forces. Members do not own problems and collaborate to solve them. This way of communicating does not create an environment that nurtures self-reflection and collaborative organizational movement. When listening in on a conversation about a challenge in a toxic collegial culture, you might hear the following phrases:

- These students are the problem! Where is the support from home?

- Can you believe that nothing is being done about this? Someone needs to do something about this!

- I don't know why we even try! Nothing will change!

If phrases such as these are a regular part of the interaction between staff members, the culture is toxic, and no meaningful growth will happen until the paradigm of that culture changes. Toxic environments do not allow anything of value to grow. Change must happen at every level, but the most powerful place to start is in the collegial culture. Individual teachers who make an effort to change their communication style can make a difference within the collegial culture and thus impact the entire school culture.

Managerial Culture

In the *managerial culture*, members control the policies, practices, and procedures that affect others within the organization. For a teacher, this means control over his or her classroom. A site

administrator has direct control over the policies, practices, and procedures in a school, while central or executive administrators have control over the formal affairs of the system. Each professional in a school culture belongs to a culture of peers and colleagues, but he or she also serves a formal managerial role that places him or her in a different role. Managerial culture is important in school reform because in order to develop a healthy culture, leaders at every level have to recognize the impact of their decisions on the beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors of those they lead.

All behavior is motivated—it has an intended outcome that is personal and specific to the individual (Glasser, 1998). Leading others requires leaders to take some personal responsibility for the success or failure of the people they lead (Bolman & Deal, 1995). Leaders that simply give instructions and expect productivity are not qualified to transform a school culture.

In *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive* (2008), Michael Fullan's first secret, or leadership principle, is "love your employees." At first glance this notion may seem too emotional, but Fullan's explanation reveals that this strategy is a complex one:

> Loving your employees is not just about caring for employees. It is also about what works to get results. It is about sound strategies linked to impressive outcomes. One of the ways that you love your employees is by creating the conditions for them to succeed. (p. 25)

A good leader invests in the success of his or her staff. In a healthy culture, this happens at all levels—from administrators at the district level to individual teachers at the classroom level. Good leaders provide those they lead with formative feedback and allocate resources to help them improve, such as instructional coaching for struggling teachers or mentors for new administrators. If leaders adopt this outlook, frustration and stress will go down. People will feel more satisfied. This positively affects overall culture, moving the school from toxic to healthy—from a low-will to a high-will culture.

It's important to note that the behavior and language of the collegial culture is influenced by the behavior and language of formal

leadership (Baldoni, 2007). Leaders set the tone in formal settings for how their staffs will communicate and handle problems in informal settings. Their behavior helps shape the language of the collegial culture. Leaders who take an external view of responsibility and communicate that view to staff will find themselves with a staff that is also reluctant to take responsibility. Starting formal communication with "The central office is making us . . . ," for example, is not a good way to encourage teachers to be self-reflective and solve problems. The leader who helps his or her staff reflect on the moral and professional purpose for a behavior or policy is much more likely to gain universal commitment for change. These leaders use language that reinforces a commitment to the betterment of "our students," which is likely to increase staff buy-in and help unite the staff members in their common purpose.

Reducing Fundamentalism

Most Fundamentalist behavior is an adverse response to a history of improper leadership. The school culture framework (Muhammad, 2009) we mentioned earlier in the chapter identifies four levels of Fundamentalism:

- Level-one Fundamentalists—These staff members resist change because they were never provided with a clear rationale for change. They do not understand the philosophical reasoning behind change initiatives, so they tune out change because it has no personal validity. Level-one Fundamentalists often exist because leaders have poor communication, and there is a lack of transparency.

- Level-two Fundamentalists—These staff members distrust their leaders. They become apprehensive about the validity of changes and reject them because of this distrust. They may feel like their leaders do not trust them.

- Level-three Fundamentalists—These staff members experience task overload. Their feelings of being overwhelmed and underprepared cause them to become fearful, anxious, and apprehensive about participating in the

change. Leaders of level-three Fundamentalists often fail to properly develop their staff members' skills and resources.

- Level-four Fundamentalists—These school personnel have a need to be defined as oppositional. Their social status among their peers is based on resistance, and thus cooperation would redefine who they are—even if leaders have properly communicated rational, fostered trust, and provided adequate training. The only tool leaders can use to lead these staff members is coercion, creating a battle of wills.

Leaders can reduce the first three levels of Fundamentalism with effective leadership, usually without conflict and without destroying the professional relationship. As Porter (1961) noted, if the stimulation can be changed, so can the response. Reducing the fourth level of Fundamentalism requires leadership, but leadership of a different kind. Management pioneer Frederick Taylor (1947) wrote that "the principal object of management should be to secure maximum prosperity for the employer" (p. 174). Ultimately, a leader has to hold people accountable for their behavior and for achieving organizational results. As Fullan (2008) articulates, a leader is responsible for the development and cultivation of those that he or she leads, but that investment has to ultimately achieve tangible results.

Employees who thrive on being oppositional require strong monitoring and authoritarian leadership. For example, school leaders often have control over teaching assignments, and they can ensure that Fundamentalists are not rewarded with the most coveted positions. Once leaders have established an environment for productive behavior, they must require appropriate performance from these staff members, in spite of their personal feelings or commitments.

The behavior of Fundamentalists is detrimental to developing a healthy school culture—it can make a positive learning environment impossible. Even so, the focus of leaders must be on changing behavior, not targeting individuals. Leaders must focus on maximizing productivity within their schools and reinforcing the success of their employees by building up the Believers.

Building Up the Believers

The drama surrounding Fundamentalist agendas reduces precious time educators should be using for student-focused work, such as developing formative assessments, analyzing student learning data, and providing academic support for struggling students. Collegial and managerial cultures must rid themselves of the culture of complaint that permeates toxic cultures. This is possible if Believers begin to voice their perspectives and lobby their student-focused agendas. Fundamentalists are not shy or hesitant about lobbying. Believers can learn a lesson from this methodology. Simply closing one's door and isolating oneself from an important ideological debate is akin to sanctioning Fundamentalist beliefs. Believers need to be encouraged to lobby for extra assistance for struggling students, professional development opportunities, and changes in traditional but ineffective practices. They should feel comfortable lobbying against complaining colleagues, systems that damage students (like heavy-handed discipline and academic policies), and accepting student failure. We will explore methods to encourage Believers to do this in the next chapter.

Reversing Perceptions

Toxic school cultures are filled with drama, specifically dysfunctional interactions between professionals. These dysfunctional interactions sentence some schools to imprisonment within an atmosphere of fighting over petty issues instead of working together to achieve success for all students. Good structures, strategies, and practices do not have a chance to blossom in such an atmosphere, and toxic school cultures do not go unnoticed by the public.

One survey found that 73 percent of Americans believe teaching is an honorable profession ("73% Say Being a Teacher," 2010). This poll also found that only 24 percent of Americans think that education is a desirable career to pursue. The survey found that 60 percent of people think schools became worse in the previous twenty years, while 20 percent think schools improved in that time span. Most citizens view education and the education profession as

valuable, but they also view the system as degenerating rather than improving. If educators want citizens to support public education and provide adequate political and financial support, they must work to reverse this perception.

Understanding and predicting patterns of human behavior is important in a school's quest to intentionally develop a high-will organization. The school culture framework we've described here gives us an understanding of how to positively influence the culture of a school. Believers focus their attention on the success of students and the organization as a whole, and Fundamentalists place personal goals and agendas above the collective organizational goal of educating every student. Healthy cultures cannot exist in schools dominated by Fundamentalists.

In the next chapter, we will look at how leadership at every level can impact the health of the school culture and what leaders can do specifically to create high-will schools with healthy cultures. We answer the question, Who is responsible for building a healthy school culture? Before you move on to the next chapter, reflect on the following questions.

CHAPTER 4
Reflections

1   Who dominates the agenda in your school or district, Believers or Fundamentalists? How did the dominant group gain an advantage?

2   What are the issues that bring drama to your school or district?

3   How does lobbying play out in your school or district? Who controls your staff agenda, Believers or Fundamentalists, and how do people seek advantages for their own agendas? Has this system been beneficial to your

organization? If not, how can you bring attention to the situation and reframe the conversation?

4   How healthy is the communication between the collegial and managerial cultures in your school or district? Do these groups tend to be more defensive or reflective? How can you improve communication between these two groups?

5   Would you describe the professional language in your school as healthy or toxic? If it is toxic, what commitments are you willing to make to ensure that it improves?