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Culture and Climate

Joan was offered a job as the principal of Riverton High School. She was told by the assistant superintendent that this school was one of the hardest schools in the district. The staff had a reputation of running principals off, being rude to each other in meetings, and not getting along as a staff. When new teachers started working at the school, they were told to sit back, do their jobs, and be quiet. The climate of the school was negative, and over time, the negative climate helped to make the culture of the school negative as well. Joan was facing a true challenge as the principal of this school.

She started the year by taking the time to meet each staff member and get his or her unique perspective on the school. During the first staff meeting, Joan addressed what she had learned from the staff interviews, and her ideas to help people at the building learn to work together. In her initial staff meeting, Joan helped the staff set expectations for her and each other. These expectations would be used to help set the school climate and begin to impact the culture of the school. At each staff meeting, she had a brief activity planned to help the staff learn more about each other. When disagreements came up between faculty members, Joan acted as a mediator. If a staff member got out of line, Joan met with the person and addressed the issue.

Throughout the year, Joan worked hard to hold herself and the staff to the expectations set during that first meeting. For the first time in years, there was clarity in staff expectations, and issues were taken care of right away and not allowed to fester and get worse. Joan had begun to make the climate be more welcoming and positive, and she was beginning to have an impact on the culture of the school as well. Her work was far from done, but she was beginning to make progress in changing the school.

Joan faced a situation not uncommon in schools today. As a result of many factors, some schools have become unpleasant places to work. Many principals are looking for ways to improve both the climate and the culture of their schools in order to improve opportunities for student learning to occur. Joan was beginning to be successful in her quest to improve the school; others are not so fortunate. What makes the difference between success and failure for principals facing schools in which the climate and culture are negative?

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

Climate and culture are two factors that principals need to work on as they improve their schools. As you read the chapter, pay attention to the following points:

- The difference and the relationship between climate and culture
- Subcomponents of climate and culture
- The importance of these two elements in improving schools

SCHOOL CLIMATE VERSUS CULTURE

These aspects of schools get mixed together and can cause some confusion for school leaders. We provide brief information outlining the differences between the two in Figure 1.1. We will go into more depth on each later in the chapter.

School Climate

Since a school's climate refers to its day-to-day operations, it is more malleable than a school's culture, and we will start our discussion of creative strategies with an introduction to school climate. Many researchers offer definitions of school climate. Hoy and Hoy (2009) offer the following definition for school climate:

Organizational climate is a general concept that refers to the teachers' perceptions of the school's work environment; it is affected by the formal organization, informal organization, and politics, all of which, including climate, affect the motivations and behavior of teachers. (p. 329)

This work environment aspect of climate works well for those of us in leadership positions. Climate becomes the feel and atmosphere of a

Figure 1.1 School Climate Versus Culture

<p><i>School Climate</i></p> <p>The climate of a school is the immediate feel or tone that is felt or experienced on a day-to-day basis. Climate is a subset of culture and works to build toward the school culture. School climate can be immediately impacted because of its moment-to-moment nature.</p>	<p><i>School Culture</i></p> <p>The culture of a school is the deep foundation or base that governs many other aspects of the school’s operation. The culture of a school is stable and consistent over time. Changing the culture can be somewhat difficult like changing the course of a large ship moving in a certain direction.</p>
<p>Positive Climate Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the front entrance of the building, student work is displayed and highlighted. • A volunteer greeter welcomes people to the building. • Teacher-to-teacher and principal-to-teacher interactions are positive and illustrate personal regard. • The principal respects the instructional expertise of teachers and provides positive and constructive feedback. • Teachers interact outside of the workplace; these relationships benefit the workplace and the students. 	<p>Positive Culture Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When new teachers are hired, veteran teachers take it upon themselves to connect and make them feel welcome and supported. • When new teachers are hired, veteran teachers take it upon themselves to connect and make them feel welcome and supported. • The staff utilizes a formal process to pass on information about students at the end of the year to the teachers in the next grade level or content area; the focus is on providing a positive “hand-off” to the next group receiving the students. • The “hero teachers,” or the staff members that the rest of the staff idolizes, are those that have gone the extra mile to support student success. • Teachers understand that the principal observes their classes to help understand what is happening and to provide guidance rather than to look for problems. • Staff meetings are organized around collaboration and problem-solving; informational items are handled through newsletters and e-mail.

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<p>Negative Climate Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As people enter the building, they are greeted by a list of rules and regulations. • Staff members pass each other in the halls without saying “hello.” • Staff members do not eat together; individuals work alone. • Principal-to-teacher and teacher-to-teacher interactions are artificial and lack a sense of relationship and personal regard. • Teachers talk about others behind their backs; issues related to personal expectations are not addressed. • The school halls are dull and dark; paper and other litter are seen in and outside of the school. • The school is dark and dreary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers support creativity and individuality in student work; this is evidenced by their reinforcing all student attempts and posting a variety of work in their classrooms and halls. <p>Negative Culture Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers work to rule (stand up and leave meetings right when their contract day is finished, do the minimum work required by the district, etc.). • Negative or outspoken staff members who cause trouble are idolized. • The lounge or work area is always inhabited by negative people who talk negatively about students; any positive talk is quickly squelched. • The principal is known for pointing out only mistakes in teaching during feedback conferences; teachers have great anxiety related to evaluation observations. • Teachers report that their opinions and ideas are not listened to or used in improving the school. • People work only within their specific role or job assignment; no help or assistance is provided to colleagues. • New teachers are left on their own to prove themselves; if they don’t make it, staff members are not concerned. • People work with their doors closed and do not share ideas or strategies.
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school. Many people comment that they can “feel” the climate of a school right when they walk in the building. This “feel” permeates through the building from the front office to the classrooms. The good feeling we experience as visitors also helps the school to be a comfortable and safe place for students to grow and learn. Educational

leadership expert Dr. John Hoyle of Texas A & M offers the following observations:

School climate may be one of the most important ingredients of a successful instructional program in a district or school. A broad term, "climate" refers to the environment of a school as perceived by its students, staff, and patrons. It is the school's "personality." (1982, p. 6)

The environment or personality of the school does describe its climate. It is important to think about this personality as you begin to understand the climate of your building. See how the climate of a school is illustrated in the following example:

Philip, the principal of Lang Middle School, believes in operating a school that has a positive climate. He works hard to make people feel welcome when they enter the building. He has asked his custodial staff to make sure the front entrance is always clean and bright. They sweep the halls in the front of the building at least four times each day. Philip has also had them install more lighting in the front entrance so that it is bright and cheery. A rotating exhibit of student work is displayed in the front entrance so that visitors can see the bright and colorful examples of student work when they enter the school.

Office staff members cheerfully greet visitors, asking how they can help them. Even though the front entrance to the building is also a security area, the office staff overcomes the security feeling through their friendly actions. New visitors to the school are asked to sign in, given a colorful visitor's badge to wear, and then are escorted to their destination by a parent volunteer or student ambassador. These volunteers point out positive aspects of the school as they escort visitors to their destinations. This positive attitude rubs off on the students and parent volunteers, who take great pride in their school and tell others about its positive climate. People continuously comment that Lang Middle School has a positive school climate and is a good place for students and teachers.

Philip's story is simple but powerful. Are there problems and issues at Lang Middle School? There are several issues the staff is working together to address, but the first impression that people have when they enter the school is that things are under control and organized. The school seems to be a safe place for learning and a place the people like to be. This initial impression of a school is an important aspect of school climate. If the building is welcoming, people attending school, working in, and visiting the building have a good feeling about being there. If the initial impression is negative or even neutral, people's impression and attitude can be

shaped toward the negative. Let's look at another school and see how different its climate is compared to that of Lang Middle School:

At Oakview Middle School, visitors enter the building and are greeted by an empty hallway. The floors are swept once daily, and a few papers are scattered about. Once visitors enter, there is a sign directing them to go to the main office (which is to the left about 20 feet from the main entrance). When visitors reach the main office, they see a large counter. Behind the counter, office staff members are answering the phone, writing passes for students, and processing paperwork. Normally visitors are not greeted right away but must wait a few minutes before someone notices them and asks if he or she can help them. Many times, because they are busy with other chores, the office staff members have to tell visitors that they will be with them in a minute.

Once the visitors have identified their destinations, they are given directions to get there and issued a pass. Nobody accompanies visitors to their final destinations. Many parents comment that they feel unwelcome at the school and limit their visits as much as possible. Students of the school do not take pride in the building, and there tend to be paper and other items on the floors.

Oakview may be the most nurturing school in the community, but the overall impression that visitors get is negative. The school will have to work hard to overcome this feeling with students, staff, and visitors.

These two schools present different first impressions and ultimately have set up different climates for learning. Even though the schools presented here have seemingly slight differences in the appearance of their front entrances, the climates of these schools are vastly different. The feel or tone of each school is set within the first 20 feet of the entrance. The climate is positive at Lang and a little less than positive at Oakview.

The previous examples are simple but powerful and illustrate that purposeful efforts do pay off in a more positive climate. Simple and straightforward strategies to improve school climate compose one focus area of this book. Throughout the various sections and chapters of the book, we will be sharing simple ideas that you can use to immediately improve your school climate.

The climate or personality of a school is one key to the success of the students and the adults in the learning environment. Climate tends to be the moment-to-moment aspects of the school personality. These moment-to-moment aspects do tend to work together to begin to define a more pervasive aspect of the school—the organizational culture. In the next section we will briefly examine the aspect of school culture.

School Culture

School culture is related to climate but more comprehensive (and pervasive) than climate. The culture is the result of the combined climate issues

that have been in place and reinforced over an extended period of time. Let's take a look at the experiences of Cathy, the principal of Dorsey Elementary School, in relation to the aspect of school culture:

Cathy, the principal of Dorsey Elementary School, works hard to ensure that the staff members contribute to the positive culture of the school. She understands that since culture is a long-term and pervasive aspect of a school, it needs constant maintenance. One aspect of Dorsey's culture that is strong is related to the problem-solving process. For years, staff members have been engaged in providing insights and input into helping to solve problems at Dorsey. This was a new aspect to Cathy when she came to the school, so she spent her first year there learning how the process worked and seeing how it fit her operating preferences as a principal. Cathy was able to work with the staff to identify the types of decisions or problems they wanted to be involved with and used this information to develop a decision-making matrix. This matrix is used now to determine the level of involvement the staff needs or desires related to solving problems. Cathy is able to quickly determine when to involve the staff and when to move forward on her own using this matrix. The staff is also happy that she understands their preferences and uses them to help focus their involvement. The culture of the school (the desire of the staff members to be involved in significant decisions) has been honored, while Cathy is able to move forward independently on issues that are less significant to the staff.

In this example, it's easy to see that the staff members at Dorsey Elementary School believe in participating in decisions. Teachers like to be involved in solving problems and making decisions, and this desire is ingrained in the long-term behavior of the teachers. The desire to be involved in decisions is a part of the *culture* of the school. School culture relates to long-term and embedded beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that impact the core or foundation of a school. Several authors provide insight into the concept of organizational culture.

Edgar Schein, one of the pioneering authors in the area of organizational culture, provides insights into the aspect of culture. In his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2004), Schein provides the following thoughts:

The culture of a group . . . can be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

Other authors offer their perceptions of school culture: Sergiovanni (2007) writes, "Culture is generally thought of as the normative glue that holds a particular school together" (p. 145). According to Hoy and Hoy (2009), "It's useful to think of organizational culture as a pattern of shared

orientations that bind the organization together and give it a distinctive identity” (p. 319). Taking these definitions into account, we find that the concept of culture refers to the deeper, more foundational aspects of the school’s operation.

Schein provides a listing of the most common attributes that are shared by groups of people that make up the culture of an organization.¹ As you review this list, think about the kinds of behaviors you see that exemplify these components:

1. Observed behavioral regularities when people interact (the language they use, the rituals in place, etc.)
2. Group norms (the implicit standards and values that evolve)
3. Espoused values (the articulated and public principles and values the group appears to be seeking to achieve)
4. Formal philosophy (the broad policies that guide the group’s actions toward stakeholders)
5. Rules of the game (the implicit rules for getting along in the organization)
6. Climate (the feeling that is conveyed by the group related to physical layout, interactions, etc.)
7. Embedded skills (the special competencies group members display in accomplishing certain tasks)
8. Habits of thinking/mental models (the shared cognitive frame or “ways of thinking” used by members)
9. Shared meanings (emergent understandings shared by group members)
10. Root metaphors or integrating symbols (the ideas, feelings, and images developed by the group to characterize itself)

Now let’s examine another school and its culture from Schein’s perspective.

At Howell Junior High School, a negative culture exists. When teachers are asked to share their mission, many report that they want to get through the year and “keep the zoo under control.” Many of the teachers at Howell have been assigned there from other buildings; the school is seen as a dumping ground for ineffective teachers. The staff has an informal award that is given each month (at an off-site location) to the teacher that has encountered the most difficult situation and put the person causing the situation in his or her place. Teachers at the school rarely attend

1. From *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (pp. 8–10), by E. Schein, 2004, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2004 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

extracurricular activities, and those new teachers who do are quickly confronted by veteran staff members and “set straight.” The teachers rarely volunteer for committees and task forces, so the principal, Elana, has to assign people to these roles. In staff meetings, very little actual work is completed (outside of teachers correcting student homework). The teacher evaluation process is met with resistance; teachers talk about the frivolous suggestions for improvement that they receive from Elana. After the contracted duty day is over, there is a race to the parking lot.

The example may seem to be a little extreme, but as you can see, negative behaviors have become institutionalized at Howell. The negative culture illustrates several of the 10 aspects pointed out by Schein earlier and is the result of several years of negative climate components going uncorrected. Elana has her work cut out for her as the principal of this school and faces the possibility of falling into the negative culture of the school herself.

RAPPORT, TRUST, CLIMATE, CULTURE, AND THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIP

Rapport, trust, and climate are crucial aspects of the success of a school and its principal and administrative team. The aspects of rapport, trust, and climate work together to assist in the development of a school’s culture. Let’s take a brief look at these elements and their interrelationships:

Rapport. Rapport relates to the interpersonal relationship between two parties on a moment-to-moment basis. Since rapport is based on moment-to-moment interactions, the strategies that help to build rapport tend to be interpersonal in nature; examples include looking at other people while you are speaking to them, sincerely smiling when something interests you, showing personal regard to another, etc.

Trust. Trust relates to a group’s understanding that both the group itself and the individuals within the group are reliable (Tarter as reported in Kochanek, 2005, p. 7). Trust is built on the summation of many experiences with a person. The elements of integrity, reliability, honesty, competence, and personal regard work together to help you develop a sense of trust with another person.

Climate. Climate is an aspect that relates to the day-to-day tone or feeling in an organization. The leader of a school helps to set the climate of the organization through words and actions. Climate is important, because it leads to the establishment of the culture of the organization.

The elements of rapport, trust, and climate are vehicles that you can have an impact on as the principal and ultimately begin to shape the school's culture. While you may not be able to impact the culture in the short term, you can build rapport, develop trusting relationships, and implement strategies to nurture a positive school culture. Let's look at some of the elements we just introduced in more detail.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

In *The Leadership Challenge* (2007), authors Kouzes and Posner discuss many principles essential to excellent leadership. The book is currently in its fourth printing, after having first come on the market in 1987. The book is unique in its content, because most of the principles outlined in it are based on research. Since 1987, the authors have been asking people to respond to a survey outlining important characteristics of leaders. Over the past 25 years, the following four leadership attributes have been rated the highest:

- Honest
- Forward-looking
- Inspiring
- Competent (Kouzes and Posner, 2007, p. 29)

How can principals utilize this information and begin to impact school climate and ultimately the culture of a school? Here are some suggestions:

Honest (Sample Strategies)

- Be honest but diplomatic when looking at needed areas of improvement at your school. People would rather know up front about situations than find out about them through the grapevine or be surprised later.
- When parents call with complaints of negative information about teachers, let the teacher know about the call. Share with the teacher that what you are sharing is just the parent's perspective and that you are not accusing him or her related to the parental perception. Tell the teacher that you just wanted him or her to know in case something else comes up as a result of the situation.
- When evaluating teachers, be careful to make sure you provide accurate feedback. Don't overpraise or be overcritical when conferencing or providing feedback to your teachers.

Forward-Thinking (Sample Strategies)

- Your staff members will be looking to you to help them see beyond the present moment and look into the future. Some people call this behavior

“sharing the vision.” As you talk about the future, provide clear pictures of how things will be based on the strengths and limitations of the school.

- When dealing with issues that come up from time to time at the school, be careful not to revisit the past all the time. Don’t always rely on what’s been done in the past; clearly communicate that you are interested in talking about what can be done in the present with the situation.

- At staff meetings, allow for plenty of time to brainstorm lots of possible solutions to presented problems. Ask staff members to hold off in judging the ideas that are brainstormed until all of the possible ideas are shared. This will allow you to get lots of ideas on the table for consideration and help the group to focus on the future rather than the past related to problems they may encounter.

Inspiring (Sample Strategies)

- Effective principals know how to make people feel good about themselves and where they work. Look for opportunities to point out the positive attributes of the people you work with and the school you lead. As you inspire people, remember to be honest and realistic. What you say to inspire others will become reality if they trust and believe you.

- Share the context of potential problems, and help people see their place in relation to the big picture. This will help you motivate and inspire people to move beyond the negative attributes some problems bring to the school.

- At the beginning of new projects or initiatives, plan for the culminating celebration that will occur when the project is completed. Many organizations fail to plan for celebrations and end up skipping this important part of the success and inspiration of a group.

- Allow people to get to know you and see that you are real. At times, letting your guard down in an appropriate manner can inspire your staff members to do the same. Allowing people to see “inside” of you brings the important human element to the workplace.

Competent (Sample Strategies)

- As the leader of a school, you need to be seen as competent in your own professional practice. Seek feedback about your strengths and limitations so you can continue to grow and learn as a leader. You may not know how to do everything perfectly, but people will come to respect your skills if they see you are growing and learning.

- Let your staff members know when you are involved in training and development. This message communicates that you are competent and confident enough to remain a learner while on the job. Share what you

think is appropriate related to your growth with staff members at meetings and seminars.

- Focus on what you do best, and seek help from others when you face tasks or jobs that challenge you.
- Make sure that the basic structures are in place for the orderly and efficient operation of the school to take place. People will see you as competent if the office operates in an efficient manner, meetings are scheduled in advance, there are processes in place to handle common situations, and the school is orderly.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

The area of establishing and building trust is a key component in developing a positive school climate and ultimately beginning to impact the culture of your school.

In the book, *Building Trust for Better Schools*, author Julie Reed Kochanek shares the following finding: “The latest research on trust in school has even demonstrated a positive relationship between trust and school effectiveness, making a connection between the growth of trust and organizational changes, which can lead to improved educational outcomes for students. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy, Tarter & Witkoskie, 1992)” (2005, pp. 6–7). Since trust relates so closely to climate, the development of it positively impacts student achievement. What is experienced by the teachers is indirectly transmitted to the students.

In *Leadership and the New Science* (1995), Wheatley contends that values and behaviors have a way of being transmitted throughout organizations. If a value or behavior is exhibited in one part of the organization, it will show up somewhere else even if the two parts of the organization are in limited contact. Your efforts to genuinely increase trust in your school will ultimately result in improving the school climate for the teachers, which will result in an improved climate and learning environment for the students.

Kochanek provides additional information about trust in the following:

The body of work coming out of Ohio State University from Hoy and his colleagues (Tarter et al., 1989, p. 295) defines trust as a group understanding that both the group itself and the individuals within the group are reliable. Further conceptual study from this group led to a description of the five components of faculty trust: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). (2005, pp. 6–7)

STRATEGIES TO BUILD TRUST AND IMPACT SCHOOL CLIMATE²

- Develop open communication about roles and expectations.
- Be clear in defining work expectations (work “contracts”).
- Show integrity by sharing your beliefs related to what is best for children and then following through on those beliefs.
- Show personal regard when dealing with others.
- Generate familiarity among diverse groups (socially, ethnically, etc.) by providing opportunities to communicate and interact through social exchanges.
- Lower the perception of vulnerability that some groups may feel in interactions.
- Engage in simple activities to build a base for more complex activities later.
- Follow through on what you promise; avoid overpromising.

SUMMARY

The terms *climate* and *culture* are sometimes used interchangeably by educators. Keep in mind the differences between the two terms and how they impact your school. Climate refers to the feeling tone of your school. Climate is more easily changed than culture. School culture, on the other hand, refers to a deeper, more embedded aspect of your school. The culture of a school includes observable and unobservable components such as formal practices, artifacts (or products), and the informal rules of the organization. Culture can be difficult to impact because of its more permanent, embedded nature.

As you review the major concepts from this chapter, reflect on the following questions:

- Why is climate so important for the operation of a good school?
- What are some examples of positive climate attributes?
- What processes do people go through in developing trusting relationships? How do people manage these processes?
- How does climate work to impact school culture? What are examples of items you could examine that would give you an idea of the culture of a school?

In this first chapter, we have provided you with a brief overview of the general concepts of school climate and culture. This was important, because as a principal, you need to be able to identify aspects of both climate and

2. From *Building Trust for Better Schools* (pp. 7–32), by J. Kochanek, 2005, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Copyright 2005 by Corwin. Adapted with permission.