Using Behavioral Standards to Shape Your School's Culture

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January, 2017

Independent schools have been increasingly focusing efforts on risk management strategies to protect student safety and well-being. However, no strategy, no matter how well thought out or implemented, will be successful if the school has an unhealthy or dysfunctional culture. When bad things happen to good schools, they almost always involve an unhealthy culture at some level within the school. Following crises, many independent schools have tried to bring about organizational change through various strategies, including restructuring, hiring new people in leadership positions and implementing comprehensive risk management plans. Such changes notwithstanding, when critical aspects of a school's culture are unhealthy, more often than not, the underlying issues persist and the problematic behaviors eventually re-emerge. Regardless of a school's strategic efforts, regardless of a school's compliance structure, the behavior of some individuals will revert to doing "business as usual' or continuing 'the way things are done'.

Organizational culture refers to shared values and self-sustaining patterns of behavior within an organization. Culture represents the character and personality of an organization. The impact of culture on an organization is so powerful that there is an aphorism about how it impacts efforts to bring about meaningful change: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast". Variations on this theme have culture consuming structure, vision, and process. Organizational efforts to prevent further crises will not succeed unless the aspects of the underlying culture that contributed to the behavioral misconduct are understood and addressed.

Culture change will not come about without planning, effort and buy in. The effort to evaluate and improve a school's culture must start at the top. Culture change requires commitment from the head of school and the board of the trustees. It will require buy-in from the entire administrative team and the leaders of key constituencies in the school. Implementing culture change will take time, commitment and persistence. Most organizations have a strategic plan, but few have a culture plan. A school should capitalize on its cultural strengths to counter-balance existing cultural resistance. It should identify critical behavioral changes it wants to achieve. Initially, it is easier to focus on changing behaviors than changing mindsets. It is important to have management practices in place to reinforce these behavioral changes.

A valuable tool for positively impacting and influencing the underlying culture of a school over time is the introduction of behavioral standards at every stage of the employment process. The first step is to develop a short, succinct list of behavioral standards for employees relating to their interactions with students and each other. The standards should cover the key behavioral dynamics that contribute to the healthy development of students and, conversely, to dysfunctional adult – student relationships. (See my article "Guideposts for Teachers to Maintain Healthy Relationships with Students"). As much as possible, the standards should be

prescriptive, not proscriptive. In other words, the standards should state more "do's" than "don'ts". They should also be as non-controversial as possible. This should not be difficult as most schools already have behavioral language scattered throughout their faculty and staff handbooks. This language is often in various forms, including aspirations, guidelines, expectations and standards. Using this existing language as a foundation, a school can create a list of key behavioral standards that will, in effect, be a summary of what is already expressed in one form or another elsewhere.

As the standards will essentially summarize existing norms, getting buy-in from key constituencies should not be difficult. Indeed, resistance to standards that reflect established policies is an indicator of underlying cultural divisions. When seeking buy-in, it is important to avoid the tendency of "group-think" which can turn a one-page list of eight to twelve single sentences into many paragraphs or pages. It is useful to explain to those who provide input that the goal is to create a short summary of behavioral standards that can be used for hiring, training, and feedback. If greater detail is needed, it can be provided in the handbook where appropriate.

Once the list of standards is complete, a school can use it throughout the employment process. Most job descriptions for school positions focus on required skills. Having a list of standards enables a school to reference expected behaviors as well. The standards should be referenced throughout the rest of the hiring process as well. When interviewing a candidate, questions should be asked about behaviors, not just skills. For example, if one of the standards refers to being responsible for setting appropriate boundaries with students, a candidate can be asked to discuss situations in which setting boundaries was a challenge. The standards can also be utilized when having conversations with people providing references. For example, if one of the standards refers to always acting as a role model for students, the reference can be asked how the candidate has handled modeling behavior in difficult situations.

When hiring a new faculty or staff member, it is typical to have them affirm that they have read and will abide by the employee handbook. When a school has a list of behavioral standards, it can append the list to the hire letter and have the employee review and sign the list. This should be repeated annually. When new hires are trained on school policies and risk management, the list of behavioral standards should be constantly referenced and reinforced.

Most evaluations of faculty and staff focus on performance of required skills. Having a list of behavioral standards enables a school to evaluate and provide feedback based on behaviors as well. Behavioral standards are particularly useful when having challenging conversations with employees about behavioral issues. For example, it is not uncommon for employees to deflect responsibility for problematic behavior by explaining that their intentions were good. A behavioral standard that employees should be alert to and take responsibility for the impact of their behaviors can provide a supervisor with a reference point for discussion when faced with such a response. Being able to reference a list of behavioral standards enables clearer feedback, promotes greater insight and helps to avoid misunderstandings. Ideally, supervisees will be more

receptive to mentoring and coaching so that problematic behaviors will not continue. But if the behaviors do persist, there will now be documented incidences of feedback, direction and behavioral expectations that can be used to justify employment action, including a non-renewal.

By introducing behavioral standards at every stage of the employment process, a school can gradually impact and influence the underlying culture of the school.

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