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HOW SCHOOLS TALK ABOUT AND NOTICE SCHOOL CULTURE

# How Schools Talk About and Notice School Culture

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School A defines its culture as innovative and cutting-edge. They say, “No other school does it like we do.” In reality, this school is out of touch with what is happening outside the campus, and it doesn’t see that the school may not be as innovative as the community thinks—either nationally or in the local market. *How can this school more accurately see its culture?*

School B prides itself on its community spirit and the rituals and traditions that bring the community together—many of which have been celebrated for generations of graduates. Yet many of these are grounded in the past and disconnected from the community that now exists. Some may be repellant—even hurtful—to members of the community. *Can a school be inclusive while holding up traditions that are by nature exclusive?*

School C, a historically selective high school has been known for educating the “best and the brightest” with a rigorous academic experience. The school now finds itself in a softer market, woefully out of step with students who crave more relevant experiences and bring more neurodiverse profiles. *How will its culture need to shift so the school can serve learners in new ways?*

School D has always defined its culture as nurturing, warm, and deeply personalized—made possible by small class sizes that have allowed every student to develop close relationships with their teachers and peers. It’s the magic of the school. But the school’s long-term financial strategy points to increasing class size and downsizing the faculty. *What will be the magic now?*

Talking about school culture can be a bit like wrestling with a shadow. It's ambiguous and hard to grasp, as these ever-so-common scenarios demonstrate. Still, it's there, lurking behind everything we do. And it is this the way that independent schools talk about their cultures—that both defines and distinguishes them *and* keeps them stuck.

In our work, we often witness schools grappling with their culture and reckoning with their cultural barriers. Their own culture is getting in the way. But perhaps the greatest obstacle for schools when it comes to the healthy evolution of their culture is the inability to honestly see it—or to clearly articulate it.

Blinded by nostalgia for a culture that once was—or maybe never was—they struggle to diagnose the parts that need to change. Our love for our schools can make it harder to see the reality that others experience. If you are absolutely certain about the health, relevance, and coherence of your school culture, you might be lying to yourself.

## Why We Lie to Ourselves

This deception is unintentional, of course. What we tell ourselves about our culture may be less of a lie and more of a distortion of reality that we continue to perpetuate through the stories we tell and by looking for evidence that confirms our beliefs. But why?

**Our memories are anchored in the past, and over time they become more positive.** Call it the Gatsby dilemma. As time passes, we imagine the perfection of a time that may not have even existed. But it's comforting to remember that time and be associated with it—even if we weren't there. We tend to bring forward the stories of success and share them until they become part of the filter we use to view our schools.

**We were founded on exclusivity and, secretly, many of us like it.** “Inclusive” is a word with a positive connotation in our culture; interestingly, the word “exclusive” can have a positive connotation as well. Knowing that the culture we now belong to has a history of selectivity makes some of us feel special. Even some who recognize the need to undo a culture that has excluded people based on race, religion, or sexuality still find other forms of exclusivity appealing—the process of “being admitted” to a school inherently suggests that the school isn't for everyone and those who have been invited are part of the “club.”

**We cannot accurately see the culture we are a part of.** Like we do in our own families, we make assumptions about the way things are, and we are incapable of seeing something else because we are so deeply embedded in our culture. It's as invisible as the air we breathe.

**We see what we want to see, and “what was” may no longer exist.** A school leader once confidently shared how the school had a really unique culture of humor and play. The example he shared was a prank someone had played nearly 10 years ago. When asked for a more recent example, he stumbled a bit and came up empty. As someone who joined the school early in his career and who had spent the subsequent years rising through the ranks, his sense of the school was formed by experiences of a culture that was no longer in practice.

We fail to nurture healthy cultures because we listen to the stories we tell ourselves. It's why new arrivals are often the best sources of information about our culture: They see it with fresh eyes.

## Noticing What Culture Does

Those of us who have been in a place for a while need to start by acknowledging the confirmation bias we bring to conversations about school culture. Rather than looking for reassurance that our culture is the way we want it to be, we should consciously look for disconfirmation. And rather than focusing on what people tell you the culture *is*, we should spend time paying attention to what the culture *does*.

This means paying attention to behaviors, rituals, and artifacts—the three observable manifestations of culture identified by Edgar Schein, organizational theorist and former professor at MIT Sloan School of Management.

**Rituals:** Rituals are repeated actions, which are often imbued with special significance through repetition. Does your meeting always start the same way—and is that purposeful or accidental? When do you gather your entire community together? Do you give awards, and what is rewarded? What events mark the cyclical passage of time throughout the day and year?

At some schools we've worked with, the routine student gathering invites students to stand in a circle and share an announcement, a reflection, or a gratitude in the moment. The group as a whole may have a ritual, like a group clap, to open the event and to close the experience. At other schools, the routine student gathering requires students to sit in rows quietly while adults talk at them, and the opening and closing of the gathering is announced by an adult. Each of those rituals communicates powerful messages about roles, agency, and power.

**Artifacts:** What and who is on the walls? What and who isn't? What messages do they communicate about what matters to you? Are there special places at the school—such as a bench—that only certain groups of students ever use? A report card, the school's daily schedule, a portrait of a graduate or other foundational documents are also artifacts that can provide clues to your culture and what you value.

At one school we worked with, there were dozens of black and white photos of retired faculty, all of whom were white. At another, there were well-curated exhibitions of student work with statements from the scholars who created them. At a third, the walls were blank. In each case, these walls reflected—and shaped—culture.

**Behaviors:** Who interacts regularly? Who never interacts? How do people talk to each other? Who gets to sit where? Who gets to walk where? Who gets to speak at meetings? Who doesn't get to speak? Who doesn't bother to try? Are there spaces where community members behave differently or abide by different rules or expectations?

There's an iconic moment in *Mean Girls* when Janice Ian shows the main character Cady a map of the cafeteria, pointing out the various groups of people that make up the school community and where they usually sit. Creating a similar map of who sits where during faculty meetings, assemblies, parent association meetings, or in the student center might reveal interesting patterns that are otherwise missed. For example, it might show who sits near people in positional authority, who sits alone, and whether people sit grouped by department, generational cohort, gender, or race.

In addition to charting who sits where, draw a diagram of attendees, and connect a line between any two points when one person speaks and another one responds. The resulting visual will look something like a map of airline routes in the back of an in-flight magazine—many lines with a few key hubs. What does it reveal?

It *is* possible to notice things that have become invisible to you. And it's important to notice while deferring evaluation or diagnosis—start by noticing what is before you decide what it means.

# Levers to Shape Culture

Once a school leader or team has gotten a clearer view of what the culture actually *is*, how can they successfully shift those aspects that no longer serve the community? What about parts of the culture that might be repellant, inaccessible, or even hurtful?

In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown shares a set of principles for change based in the natural world that give us a language for shaping and shifting culture. Her work offers two levers particularly helpful for school leaders.

**“Adapt,” don’t “disrupt.”** It may be necessary to disrupt static thinking or old habits, but that’s different than trying to disrupt culture. Like wildfire, cultural change can be either destructive or adaptive. When a wildfire clears out an area quickly, it takes a long time to regenerate. It’s better to ask how a culture can be, as brown says, “intentionally adaptive.” Words matter. If you frame changes in the culture as disruptive, they will be experienced that way.

**Look for “fractals” in the counterculture.** In *Emergent Strategy*, brown talks about the fractals found in nature, which are “infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales.” Sometimes the counterculture is really just an emerging fractal that demonstrates a small-scale model of what’s possible for the whole. “What we practice at the small scale sets the pattern for the whole system,” brown writes.

In every organization, there are groups of people functioning in countercultural ways. Often, it’s a response to something in the dominant culture that isn’t working for everyone. If you see something small that *is* working, how can you encourage the replication of that idea or practice?

To that end, the next four levers are ways to start at the small scale and let the patterns grow—in other words, to build fractals that can replicate throughout the system.

**Model new behavior.** This may seem obvious, but we find most teams don’t do this intentionally. If we want our communities to shift to new ways of being and doing, the practices must start with leaders and leadership teams. That means taking a really good look at whether you practice what you want to see in your community. If you really want your school culture to adopt new behaviors—let’s say a culture of collaboration or a culture of honest feedback—then you need to be actively pursuing and modeling that behavior with your team.

**Design new artifacts.** Start looking at the artifacts in your school as changing installations, not permanent exhibits. Simple changes to artifacts send a message to the community and also begin to shift patterns of behavior. For example, if your school has been singing the single-note “college prep” tune for decades, you probably have a college counseling office filled with pennants from colleges and universities. What are all of those pennants communicating to students about who they are and ultimately what your school is helping them to become? What if you wanted to communicate that where someone goes to college is not a measure of who they are as a person? What artifacts might you create?

**Create new rituals.** Nothing at your school has been that way forever; it just feels that way. Traditions are just innovations that were created long enough ago that we can’t imagine our worlds without them. (If you’re a stand-alone middle school, that means four years ago.) If rituals are the community gatherings that exhibit and build culture, then evolving rituals to reflect the culture you desire is critical.

**Tell new stories.** Although what we say is less important than what we do, stories can have an impact on

culture—especially those that are mythologized over time. We once worked with a school that always touted an award it had received for being a regional industry leader. When the school, 20 years later, had not received another award, a new narrative began to emerge—about decline. When we really looked at the story, it had been distorted over many years and had trapped the school into a “halcyon era” that had never existed. When a new school leader came in, he had to look more objectively at this story. He saw the way the story was keeping the school from evolving. It had become, as author and coaching consultant Elena Aguilar calls it, a “rut story.” The stories the new leader chose to tell about the school were not stuck in the past, but pointed the community toward the present and the future.

**Remember: There’s no “I” in culture.** The innovation adoption curve is hardly new, but it is useful. It reminds us that, like any change, cultural change is gradual, and it hits different pockets of a school at different moments. No leader can effect cultural change on her own. But what about those countercultures that developed? Often, they’re exactly what you need to pioneer new directions in your culture, model alternative ways of doing, or spread new practices. Savvy school leaders will look for others who will also create new rituals, artifacts, behaviors, and stories. They will choose whose examples to amplify and elevate. They will find ways to offer exposure to new ways of acting.

## The Need for Culture to Evolve

We have entered a new geological age, the “Anthropocene,” characterized by human influence on the Earth’s climate and natural resources. Other forces are leading to major disruptions as well—the internet, globalization, COVID-19, and a broad awakening to social inequities in the world will require cultures to adapt to stay relevant in the world our students will inhabit.

Culture is strong, but it is not fixed. Cultures are formed by groups of people over time, and they can be shifted by groups of people over time. The job of school leaders is not to preserve culture in a static form, but rather to shape it to meet the changing world.

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## Beginner’s Mindset

To conjure the “fresh eyes” newcomers bring so naturally, it’s important to take a posture of inquiry. Here are some questions you might explore and answer with your team:

- How do we know that what we believe and say about our culture is true?
- What if everything we believe about our culture is wrong? What would we see or hear that might tell us that?
- What behaviors, artifacts, and rituals are emerging in the school? What purpose do they serve?
- Which elements of our culture do we want to amplify or elevate?
- What values do we want to strengthen with new artifacts?
- If our founding story and the narratives we have subsequently told ourselves are grounded in being “elite and exclusive,” how might we shift our behaviors and actions to tell a new story that is more aligned with modern values and, often, our mission statements?
- What if parts of our culture are outdated and out of sync with what the world, our students, and our families need right now?

- Which artifacts, rituals, or behaviors are holding us back?
- What is the difference between how we market ourselves and our authentic culture?
- What are the financial or market realities forcing cultural change? How will we respond?
- What if our mission statement has evolved but our culture has not caught up?
- What is the resistance to evolving the culture? Who is most resistant to change? What will we have to give up or lose to evolve our culture? What might be gained?

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## Tools for Noticing Culture

Take a deep breath and set out to be a learner—not a knower—in your school. Do the things an anthropologist would do. Use an observer’s toolkit and be curious as you explore your culture. Look for the pockets of change happening. Wonder. Reflect out what you see. Here are some ways to get started.

**Shadow a student.** The core of a Shadow a Student day is a commitment to seeing the school from a student’s perspective, from morning until after school. Most adults only deeply understand their own colored block on the schedule; students experience those blocks as a series of juxtaposed, often dissonant experiences that evoke their own meanings. Check out the Stanford d.School’s Shadow a Student Challenge ([dschool.stanford.edu/shadow-a-student-k12](https://dschool.stanford.edu/shadow-a-student-k12)) for more insights and ideas or reach out to Leadership+Design for a copy of our Shadow a Student guide.

**Collect images.** Working for one public school district to understand their culture of learning, we distributed disposable cameras to students and teachers and asked them to document their day. The images became an important collection of the learner’s-eye/teacher’s-eye view. It’s not neutral, and it doesn’t seek to be. Instead, it reveals what matters to the humans who live the culture daily.

### **Look at your schedule and calendar like an ethnographer.**

The one thing schools can’t get more of is time. It’s no wonder why efforts to rethink a school’s schedule or calendar can be so emotionally intense. Often, we fail to see the values and priorities that are embedded in our use of time because they just look or feel normal.

**Share your schedule and calendar with someone from another school.** What do they notice? What do they wonder? Then, make a list of the reasons why the schedule gets disrupted. Which assemblies deserve a special schedule? Which programs get early dismissals? Those are also important indicators of what your school really values.

For more insights and ideas to think like an ethnographer, check out ” [Survey Says: Ethnographic Research Can Provide Valuable Insights](#)” in the Winter 2018 *Independent School*.

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