

# **The Role of Professional Leaders in Creating and Maintaining School Cultures in Times of Change**

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## **Background**

Before September 4<sup>th</sup> 2010, St Paul's was a thriving school with a full roll. We maintained a strong partnership with our Parish and enjoyed excellent community support. The earthquake of 2010 destroyed the school and church, and left many of our families red zoned.

The school eventually located to a temporary site by the Catholic Cathedral at the beginning of term 4 2010. This was not an easy transition. The entire junior school and six teachers shared a hall as there were insufficient teaching spaces. The intermediate classes shared a neighbouring hall while waiting for their classrooms to be ready. Several teachers were required to move classrooms over the term. Apart from the challenges we faced regarding teaching spaces, we needed to rethink the way we operated. Many of our practices had to be modified or totally changed. We could no longer operate the 'way we were used to'.

This all changed on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011 with another devastating earthquake. Our temporary home was now within the city cordon and we needed a new home. We relocated to our current site, an abandoned Ministry of Education facility. This has always been a temporary fix.

During this time of change and insecurity our community has remained committed to St Paul's. We have maintained a strong roll and achieved excellent academic results. Last term, in the midst of turmoil and community consultation regarding the future of the school, we received a four to five year Education Review Report, our best yet.

What are we doing that allows such success and fosters strong commitment from our parent community? What role do we as professional leaders play in creating and maintaining positive school culture?

## **Introduction**

This sabbatical was undertaken in Term 2 2013. It followed over two years of disruption and uncertainty in the education sector in Christchurch. The intention was to explore various school options that would assist us in planning a viable future for St Paul's school. We now know that St Paul's School will close and the focus of this research has been adapted. I have met a number of principals from a variety of different schools to gather their views on school culture and how they see their role in maintaining positive school cultures. Each of these schools has faced challenges such as the Christchurch earthquakes, falling or transient school rolls, or a merger. Of particular interest are the viewpoints from principals who have experience in merging schools and their resulting efforts to create a positive culture.

### **The principals were asked three questions:**

What do you understand by the term school culture?

How do you see your role as a professional leader?

What impact do you have as a professional leader on the school's culture?

## 1. School Culture: Definition and Characteristics

Wherever people spend considerable time together, a culture emerges. This may be a workplace, a corporation, a community group, a sports team and so on. Defining culture is difficult. It may be a list of elements or:

*an organised set of thoughts, beliefs and norms for interaction and communication; it is about how people treat each other, how they value one another, how school staff work together and get along together in a professional and personal sense, it is the consensus about what is important. (Sailes, 2008: 74-75)*

*More specifically, culture can be defined as shared philosophies, ideologies, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, values and norms (Schein, 2010a).*

Two examples of more inclusive definitions are, 'the peculiar and distinctive way of life' (Sparkes, 1999:5) and 'the way we do things around here' (Bolman and Deal (1991: 252).

Culture consists of certain beliefs, values, traditions, rituals and symbols. Combined they become symbolic of the school and they either create a mutual purpose or spread disharmony. Culture is usually implied rather than appearing in a written document and yet it guides our understanding of what is appropriate and promoted within our schools.

School culture is based on shared experiences that create a sense of community and belonging. A school's culture is usually characterised by deeply rooted traditions, values and beliefs, some of which are common across schools and others which are unique and embedded in a school's history and location. Every school has a culture, planned or not, regardless of its size or location.

As part of this research, I asked the principals to define their school culture. What characterizes their school culture? What key elements did they see as important in defining their culture? The cultures within these schools, although different, appeared to have some shared characteristics. There was a variety of responses but within the responses there were common elements that could be linked. One principal stated, "We all agree with what is important and what we want for our students. We respect and value each and every member of our school community; we work together and care for each other. We are professional. We also treasure our past and our traditions." I have summarised their responses into broad categories: atmosphere, philosophy, values, routines and behaviours.

### **Atmosphere**

This is a general feeling that surrounds the school. Principals referred to it as an impression, a feeling, the mood or tone within the school. It is seen in interactions within the community, and is visible within the first few minutes of being in a school. It is the visible and invisible signs that create a feeling for the school. The interaction between a duty teacher and a student, the busy hum in a classroom, the amount of litter around the grounds, the way the children present

themselves and their work. The way they interact with their teachers and each other, are some of the indicators easily visible in a short space of time.

### **Shared Philosophy**

This philosophy is visible in a school's mission statement and it underpins all decision making. In several of the visited schools, the mission statement was displayed in the foyer or on the schools documentation. These vision statements provide cultural markers. Their typical content seems to be a commitment to develop the potential of all students. This is a promotion of positive and optimistic attitudes presented to current and future students and their families. As one principal stated, "Our parents know what we are trying to achieve. We share this at enrolment meetings, at parent education evenings. They know what drives us. They know what underlies our practice." Another principal of a small catholic school believed that parents chose the school because of its philosophy and thus already had a sound knowledge and understanding of what the school stood for.

### **Shared Values**

The principals all expected their communities to share some common values and when prompted the values of respect, honesty and compassion featured prominently. Several principals gave specific examples about a practice within the school that highlighted how a 'value' was promoted.

One principal valued high levels of attendance and expected all students to be present at school. The school has procedures in place for when a child is not at school and all unexplained absences are recorded and followed up. These procedures are shared with the community and both parents and children know and understand them. Full attendance is expected and valued by the school.

A second school valued parent partnerships. The principal and staff ensured parents were given opportunities to share in their child's learning. This was not restricted to helping with school transport and sports days, but was more focused on providing opportunities for parents to be part of the learning process. The principal stated, "This is important to us. With such a diversity of ethnicities, our students bring their own cultural identities to the school's identity. We need our parents to be in school with their children and part of our learning culture. It is only when they become involved and present, that they truly understand what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to achieve it. This partnership is crucial if we want our children to be lifelong learners and reach their potential. It is also important for our parents to understand the school's values."

### **Routines / Behavioural Consistencies**

When the school community members interact, they use a common language, terminology and demeanour. The school community understands their own special rituals and ceremonies. These may be school assemblies, graduation ceremonies, religious observances, sporting events or similar occasions. Either way, the community knows the routine, understands the reason for the event and knows the appropriate behaviour for it.

One principal talked about their Feast day celebration. The festivities were the same every year. Both parents and children understood what was being celebrated and why. They also knew the 'how' and valued the consistency of the celebration. Each year level had a specific role to play in the celebration and the children looked forward to it. They knew the routines and expectations.

Another principal gave their discipline procedures as an example of consistency within the school. These procedures are followed by all staff, are displayed within the classrooms and are regularly referred to when required. "Our community knows that the school does not tolerate fighting. We provide and teach a raft of strategies for conflict resolution. The students all know the consequences if a fight break out. We have very few physical altercations, only one last year."

### **Standards of Behaviour**

A strong school culture has well established standards of behaviour, for all members of the school community. Students as well as parents know what is expected and what is not tolerated. These standards are clearly communicated and consistently applied by all staff members. Staff members are expected to behave professionally at all times. There are similar expectations for parents. As one principal stated, "I begin the school year with a discussion with my staff on relationships with parents and their role as professionals. We do not always agree with a parent but we need to show our respect for them. It's the same for parents really. I put our complaints policy in the newsletter at the beginning of each year and it is on the website. I expect our parents to respect us as professionals and share their concerns in a respectful manner."

When all these characteristics are taken together, they give some meaning to the concept of school culture. However the culture is interrelated with concepts and practices required for managing schools. These include management practices, school organisation or structure, communication, leadership, and decision making. In a school, principals work with all stakeholders to develop the school's culture (DuFour, DuFour and Eaker, 2008). The principal as leader of the school has to create and maintain a culture that advances the school towards its vision, reinforcing behaviours and practices that are required to continually move the school forward. The principal needs to be both a support and a visionary to the community. Developing and maintaining effective school cultures cannot be left to chance, rather it is a conscious endeavour by professional leaders.

## **2. The Role of Professional Leaders**

Dr Wayne L. Edwards, the associate Professor of Education at Massey University, presented a paper on "Towards the Eminent School: The Importance of Professional Leadership", in 2002. In this paper he defined four elements that are important in the work on school principals: managing the business, working with people, guiding the curriculum and leading towards the future. Each of these four elements must be attended to in order to maintain a successful school culture. I discussed these elements with the principals and asked for their opinion on each.

**Managing the school** is dealing with the day to day tasks, managing the schools property and finances, ensuring school routines are followed, compliance issues completed and so on. 70% of the principals I interviewed stated that the tasks involved in managing the school took most of

their time. These management tasks were seen as essential for staff and student safety and wellbeing. However principals agreed that being well run did not necessarily equate to a healthy school culture. Several principals commented on the conflict between managing the school and leading the school. As one principal stated: "My day began at seven o'clock with trying to get a relief teacher to replace a sick one. On arrival at school, we had a blocked toilet that needed fixing. Two children had not arrived at school so we spent some time tracking them down. I spent some time meeting with a social worker linked to the school, and I tried to write a report for the Board of Trustees. The day passed in a blur and I never got past the management phase."

A second principal commented that she had spent the best part of a week, rewriting aspects of her school charter because her original charter had been criticised by the Ministry. "I need it to be compliant but it does mean I don't have the time to be in the classrooms. We spend a lot of time on administration but I want the school to be seen as high achieving as well as orderly."

**Working with people** refers to the relationships within the school and the way we tend to them. Motivating and supporting staff is a key element in creating positive relationships with the school. Leaders need to be knowledgeable about their staff and aware of their needs and capabilities. They also need to value and respect staff and celebrate their diversity. The principals felt that this was the most challenging element.

One principal talked of the staff member who "undermines me with constant challenges. She makes asides in staff meetings and is completely negative in her outlook. I know she talks to the younger staff about initiatives and makes it incredibly difficult to move the school forward. It drains me of energy."

Another principal brought in trained communication facilitators to work with the staff. The school had recently been part of a merger and the principal was very aware of the history of the school and the lack of unison among the staff and wider community. "I needed to create some unity within the school. It was a group of competent individuals but an incompetent team, if that makes sense. Within their individual classrooms, they did ok. But when anything required collaboration and some compromise, particularly in the area of curriculum development, it was chaos. We are getting there but it takes time and effort, not to say patience and tolerance on my part. Hopefully this will flow over to the wider community."

One recently appointed principal was very aware of the need to connect with the staff. "Developing relationships with the staff takes up a huge amount of time. One teacher may come in and share family news, another travel plans and so on. Making time for these personal discussions is so important and is part of valuing staff. I need to do it, but in a school with twenty staff, it does take time."

The appointment of staff was raised by many principals as a concern. In one particular school, the principal believed it was a balance between hiring staff with professional knowledge and competent practice with staff who exhibited excellent relationship skills. He believed it was really important to appoint staff who fit with the philosophy and culture of the school and that finding the right person was reliant on the principal having a clear vision and philosophy.

**Guiding the curriculum**, according to Dr Edwards, refers to the “teaching and learning aspect and its promotion and improvement.” Planning programmes and learning experiences, developing relevant assessment practices, curriculum development and review all form part of creating an effective school. All the principals regarded this aspect of their role as important and felt very comfortable leading their staff in curriculum development. T

One principal, very involved with his own professional learning communities, believed, “There are so many opportunities for us as principals to keep up to date with curriculum matters. Our professional development options are wide. We receive a lot of written material from the Ministry and ERO but nothing beats the discussions with other principals, at conferences or clusters.”

A second principal stated “I believe this is my area of strength. I love learning and I am passionate about the learning of these students. I spend a lot of time on student achievement and making sure that my teachers are similarly engaged. Our leadership meetings always include student achievement updates”

A recently appointed principal said, “This is what we are supposed to do. Focus on student achievement and ways of raising it. I spend a lot of time analysing student achievement data and relating it back to current practices, looking at ways we can improve.”

**Leading towards the future** is the development of the school’s vision. A principal needs to be reflective about the current culture of the school and thinking ahead about what needs to be done to move the school forward. It is a more long term strategy. This was the most controversial area and in each interview, provocative comments were made by the majority of principals.

“Who has the time? I am so busy making sure we are compliant and that the students are learning at this point in time. I plan for the year ahead, not the next five!”

“I see only more problems ahead. The Ministry keeps imposing things on us. We have national standards; look alike charters, more rules and regulations, much standardised procedure. We want to move forward but the innovation is being stamped out.”

“Our role, according to our Boards and the Ministry, is to manage the school. If the Ministry really wants us to be school visionaries, they need to stop loading us up with compliance requirements and paperwork.”

Two of the principals who had experienced either a merger or the result of a merger were more responsive and vocal regarding this aspect of their role.

“This is the most important part of my job, and it keeps me going. Our community is still very divided, an ‘us and them’ situation. We are not yet one true community. I know what we need to do to become one and I also know this will take time. Focusing on the future helps me get through the difficulties of the present.”

“We have been one school now for a number of years. Unfortunately, the merger was not seen as a positive step for the communities and for many the hurt is still pretty raw. It is slowly

improving but it is exhausting. I keep looking ahead to where I know the school could be. I am not sure I have the energy needed to get it there!”

### **3. The Impact of Professional Leaders on the School’s Culture**

Thomas Sergiovanni devoted an entire book to the idea of building community in schools. Sergiovanni (1994) states that building community requires the development of a “community of mind” represented in shared values, conceptions, beliefs and ideas about schooling and human nature. He speaks of the importance of schools as communities bound by moral commitment, trust and a sense of purpose. He feels that communities must be built that are inclusive, meaningful and democratic.

This stage of the interviews was more focused on how individual principals understood their role in relation to their school culture. I asked each principal what they saw as their most important actions in creating and or maintaining a positive culture at their school. They worded their answers differently but again the concepts were similar.

#### **School Vision and values**

First, principals identified the need for their school culture to reflect the school’s vision and values. They try to engage with all the members of their professional learning community. Together they lead discussion on what they value and how they will act to support those values. This in turn provides the direction for the school. The school vision inherently states and reflects the school’s values. They described this vision as the “driving force” and “motivator”. The vision needs the support of all the stakeholders in order for the school to move forward. How this support was harnessed varied.

Most of the principals stated that at the beginning of each year, teachers and Boards of Trustees met and reflected on what was of value and how these values would be supported throughout the coming year. This was often part of a professional day where time was set aside for trustees to meet with staff. As well as reviewing the school vision, the staff and trustees would reflect on events that affected the culture.

One school employed outside facilitators on one occasion to lead the review but believed this appeared to have little value. The day was quite structured and there were few opportunities for relationship building. The principal believed that the discussion was not as robust, “it was as if the staff were all afraid of saying the wrong thing. We didn’t have quite the same ownership as when we worked by ourselves.”

One school took all staff and trustees away for a two day retreat. Without other distractions the stakeholders enjoyed two days of “discussion and laughter. We had a lot of fun and we got to know each other better. This was really important for the two new staff members who were able to start the year, knowing more about the school, the staff and the values we hold important. It also builds a positive relationship between the staff and trustees. A good way to start the year.”

Principals also acknowledged the role they play in maintaining school culture. As one principal said, “trustees change as do staff. We can have a completely new group of trustees every three



years. Teachers also change on a fairly regular basis. I see myself as being the one constant. I know where we have been, where we are now and where we want to go.”

Amongst the Christchurch principals included in this study, the devastating earthquakes have had a huge impact and have “changed the way we see and do things. We had to rethink some of our practices and our key values have been strengthened.”

A Christchurch principal stated that the earthquakes had resulted in a substantial roll drop. “We lost some key staff members and about a third of our students. We have also gained a group of new students and this group is very diverse. Change this rapid, unsettles the classes and has a noticeable impact on staff. We are working hard at imparting our values as well as adapting to the needs of our new community members.”

The uncertainty surrounding the future of the schools appears to have drained many principals of energy. Morale was generally low, even among the principals in less affected schools.

## **Relationships**

Relationships within the school are crucial in maintaining a positive culture. Schools should be nurturing and positive for staff members as well as students and parents. How principals and teachers treat and value each other, share their professional learning, and support one another is crucial. A healthy school culture is based on healthy relationships within the school as well as the wider school community.

Sergiovanni wrote (1995),

*Communities are concerned with ties and connections not contracts. Communities are organised around relationships and felt interdependencies that nurture them. They are defined by their centers of values, sentiments and beliefs. Members live their lives with others who have similar intentions. Empowerment focuses more on commitment, obligations and duties that people feel toward each other and toward their school.*

The concepts about relationships are broad and principals referenced it differently. The employment of staff came up with several principals.

One Christchurch principal recently employed a teacher from outside of Christchurch. “It was the best thing I did. She had no experience of the earthquakes so wasn’t affected in the same way. She brought an energy and positivity to the staffroom, as well as laughter that had been missing since the earthquakes. Our lives and the way we live them have been so heavily compromised. She helped us move on.”

At a merged school, the principal felt that hiring the staff was the most important role in contributing to the culture of the new school. “Some of the teachers chose not to move to the new school and I had several vacancies to fill. I looked for teachers that matched my vision for the new school and who held similar values. I then spread these new employees throughout the school. They were a breath of fresh air and helped break down the ‘us and them’ mentality.”

In an area where a new Catholic school was being established, the principal commented, “The trustees and I had a clear vision for what we wanted the school to be. This was shared with prospective teachers and was part of the employment process. A key question we asked at the interviews was how they would contribute to this vision. This helped us understand which employees really wanted to work at this new school and those that just wanted a job.”

Another key issue was the discussion around leadership within the school and the relationship between key members. Principals talked about shared leadership and equality and that it was important to create a sense of ownership and equity, where teachers feel involved in the decision making. One principal believed “that my teachers actively participate not only in creating the goals but help keep us moving forward.” Another principal stated “that shared responsibility brings shared accountability.”

All the principals mentioned the importance of effective communication, whether it was communication with staff, students or parents although the level of importance given to it varied. Also, it became clear during the interviews that principals’ understandings around communication also varied. One principal rated communication as highly important, but was less clear when asked for examples of shared and meaningful communication and referred to his frequent newsletters and an updated website. He didn’t mention staff or students.

Another also focused on parents and gave a parent meeting as an example. At this meeting the trustees and the principal shared their vision of the school with those interested parents. This was a “well presented” meeting and “parents went away with a better understanding of where we were coming from.” When questioned further, she agreed that although parents were invited to ask questions at the end, there was not really the opportunity for parents to contribute to the vision or review it in any way. It was an information evening. These evenings do have an important place in the communication process but in this instance communication was one way.

However several of the principals referred to open and honest communication as the key to building effective relationships and maintaining strong school culture. Shared leadership and building teams were terms used to illustrate how communication worked in their schools.

Successful professional leaders create effective channels of communication for sharing knowledge and expertise. They consult widely and encourage all staff and parents to share their views and feel some ownership over the school’s future. Staff in leadership roles are encouraged to develop ideas which help meet the school’s vision. This open communication allows for new projects and developments which are seen as collective responsibility and this gives the school community ownership of school improvements. This leads to a high sense of unity and trust, a strong and positive school culture which can withstand the challenges facing education.

## **Conclusion**

Patrick Duignan, from the Australian Catholic University, spoke at the Australian Primary Principals’ Association National Conference in 2003. He stated “Leaders in schools are confronted by external and internal challenges and expectations that make demands on their time, expertise, energies and emotional wellbeing. They are, increasingly, being held accountable for

their performance and are expected to comply with ethical and moral standards in their relationships and practices” (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997, Starrat, 1993, Taylor, 1991, Terry, 1993).

Never has this been more pertinent than to the principals in Christchurch since September 2010. Principals have experienced confusion and frustration in their attempts to respond to challenges and pressures, both personal and professional, associated with the earthquakes. School closures, mergers, falling rolls, surplus staffing, financial stresses, uncertainty and anxious staff have had a huge impact on principals.

The role of the principal in managing these issues and keeping a school culture strong and positive is crucial. It is the principal’s role to ensure their school’s culture reflects the vision and values and they do this by engaging with all members of the school community. Together they reflect on their values and vision and work together to support the school’s values and vision.

In times of change and challenge, these values are heightened and some become more important than others but they have always been a value. As an example, a school might have pastoral care as a value, and believes it does this well. However, when a natural disaster strikes, pastoral care might become the most important value. Organising food parcels, counselling, distributing water, comforting parents and children becomes vitally important. Whatever the particular challenge facing the school, the role of the principal becomes more visible and the principal needs to be adaptable to the changing needs of the community.

Teachers who already operate in a high trust environment are more likely to respond to these challenges with a collaborative approach and a willingness to work together in the face of adversity.

The role of the principal is certainly crucial in how these challenges are met. If the principal has already established a positive effective school culture, then this school is better set up to manage times of uncertainty and change. The culture already exists; staff and parents are already part of a strong supportive community. The community then becomes united in facing the challenges.

Where a school faces a merger, the challenges are immense. The professional leader has to respect and acknowledge the existing cultures of the merging schools while at the same time, creating a new culture. The communities need to feel valued and equity is crucial. Where one community feels disaffected, they are less likely to work together and a principal will struggle to create the high trust environment so necessary for success.

Dr Wayne L. Edwards placed leading towards the future as highly significant in the role of the principal. Unfortunately this was the area that the principals spent the least amount of time on.

*Coming together is a beginning.*

*Keeping together is progress.*

*Working together is success*

*Henry Ford*

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