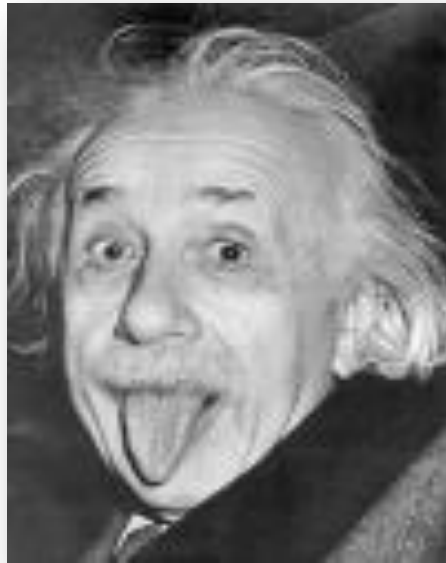# No More Drama! Developing and Leading Healthy School Cultures

Anthony S. Muhammad, Ph.D.

Is Change Necessary?
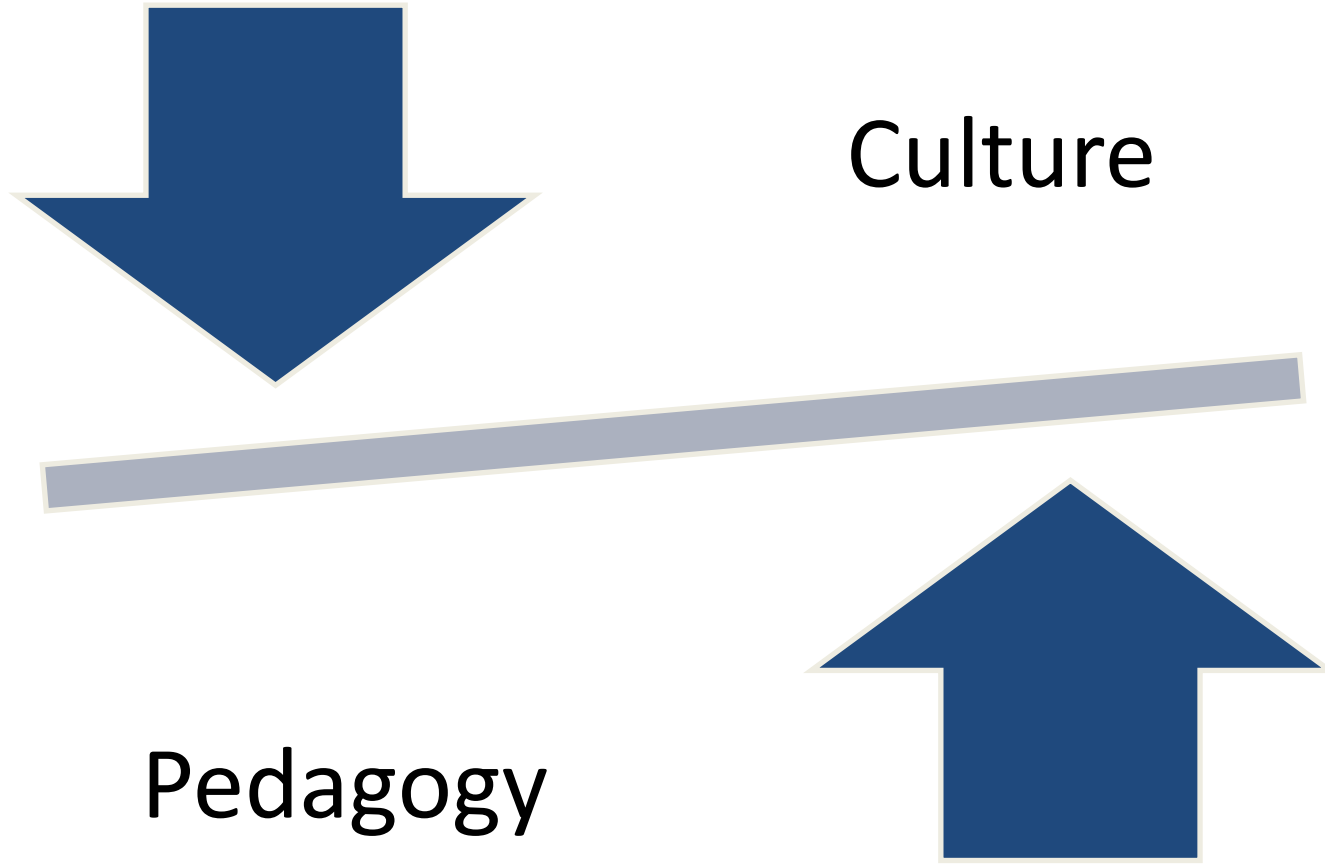

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."
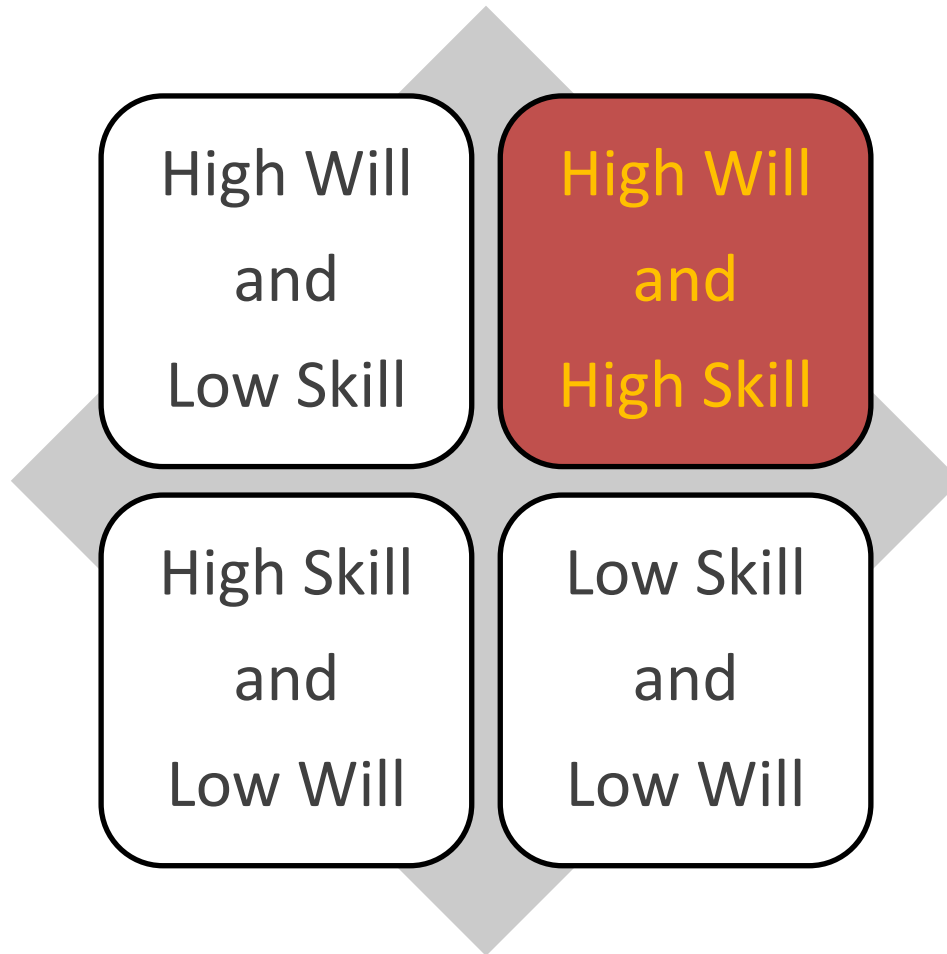
—Albert Einstein

Two Forms of Change

- Technical–structural (skill)

- Cultural (will)

Will and Skill

Culture

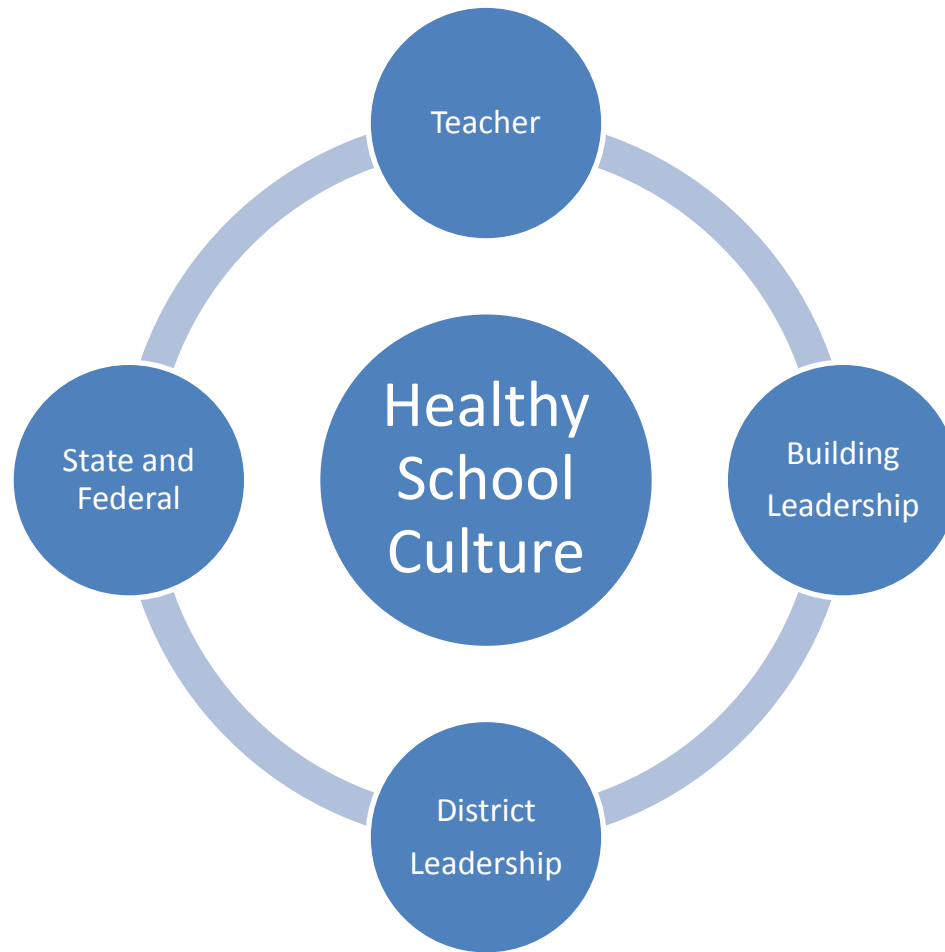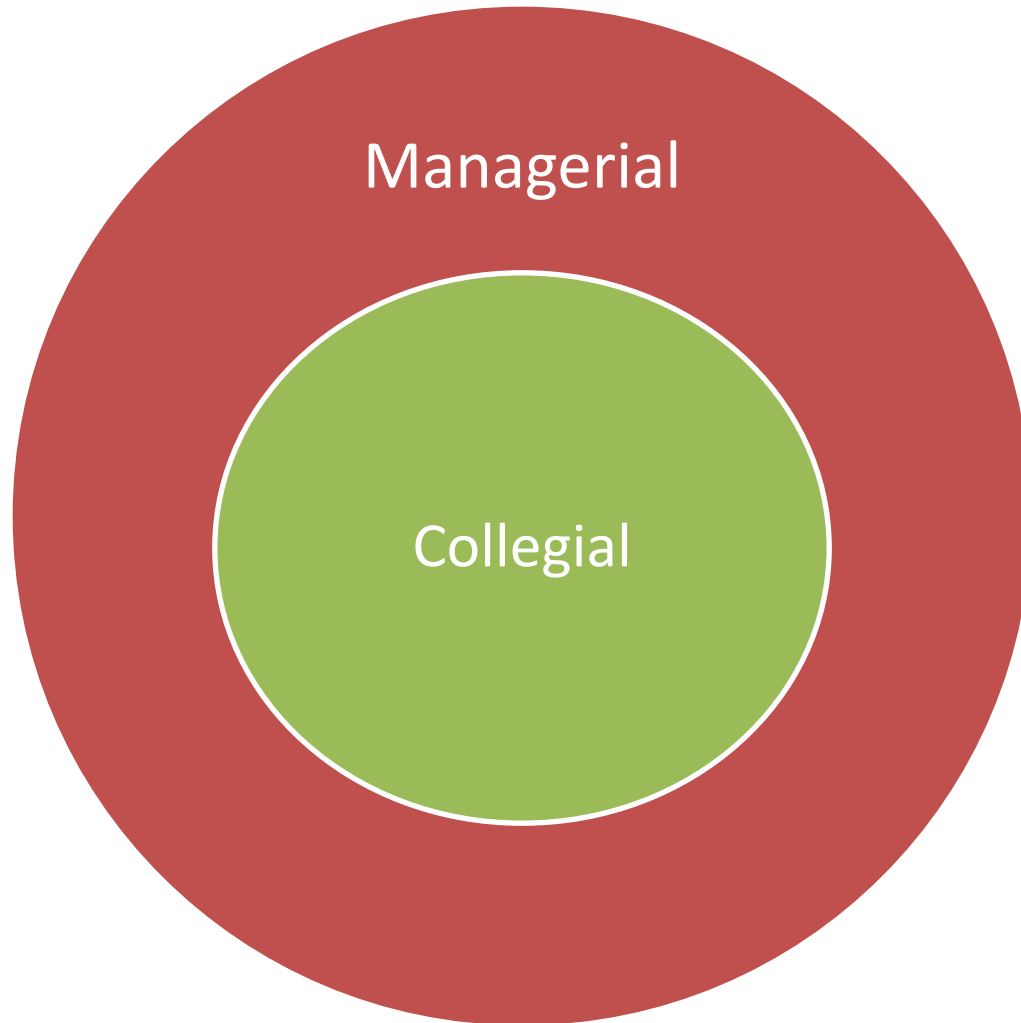Pedagogy

High Will and High Skill

School Culture

"School culture is the set of norms, values, and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school."

—Deal & Peterson, 2002

Leadership at Every Level

Two Important Subcultures: Managerial and Collegial

Healthy School Culture

"Educators have an unwavering belief in the ability of all of their students to achieve success, and they pass that belief on to others in overt and covert ways. Educators create policies and procedures and adopt practices that support their belief in the ability of every student."

—Kent D. Peterson in Cromwell, 2002

Prescriptive

Commitment	
Belief in all students	School goals guide behavior.

Reflection	
Analyze data	Confront brutal facts.

Prescription	
Collaborative	Disciplined practice

Toxic School Culture

"Educators believe that student success is based on students' level of concern, attentiveness, prior knowledge, and willingness to comply with the demands of the school, and they articulate that belief in overt and covert ways. Educators create policies and procedures and adopt practices that support their belief in the impossibility of universal achievement."

—Kent D. Peterson in Cromwell, 2002

Descriptive and Deflective

Healthy Cultures

Support

Accountability
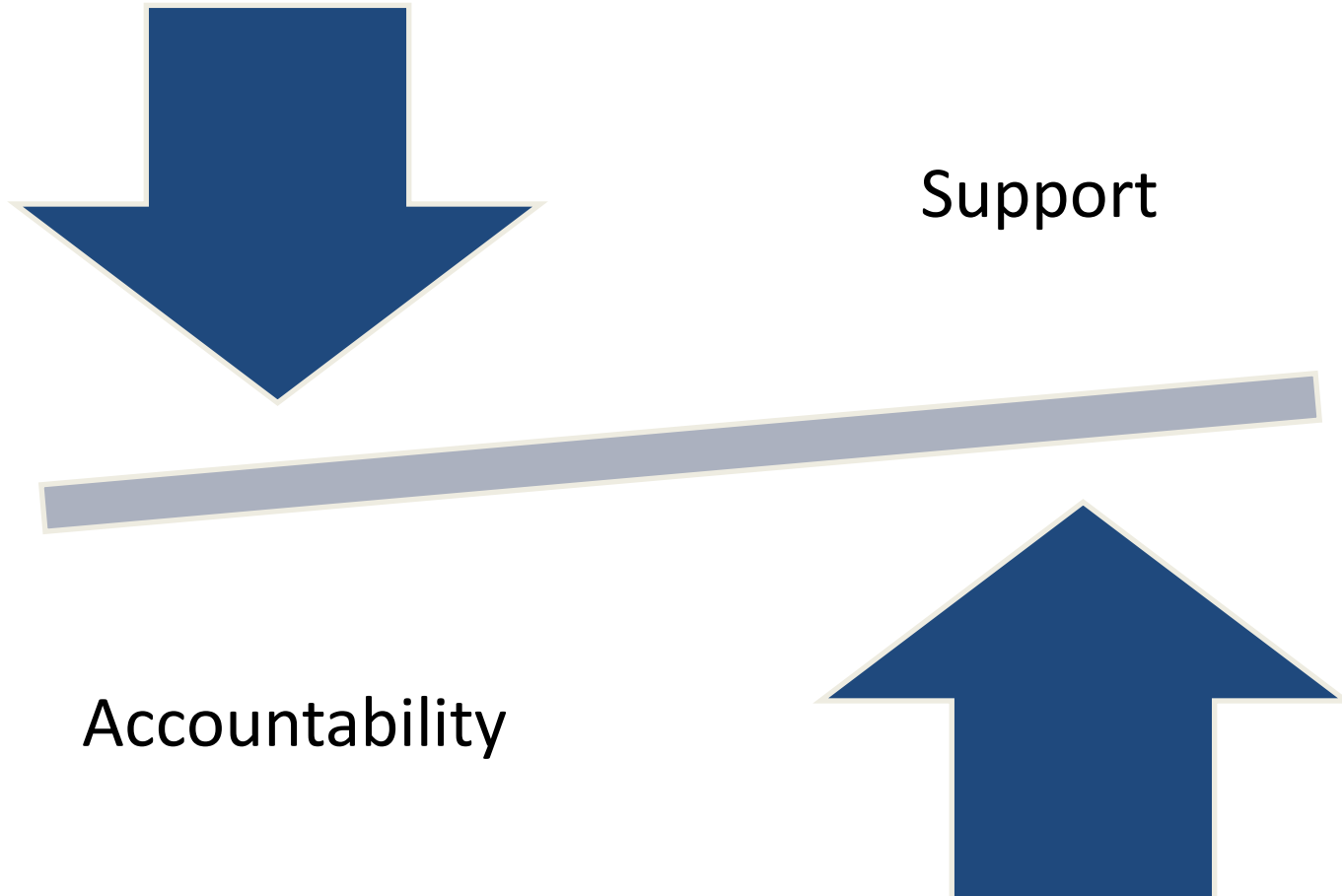
Frustration
The Root of a Toxic Culture

Frustration: A feeling of anxiety as a result of the inability to perform a task

- A mismatch between skill set and task

- Causes people to deflect blame onto others and create covert alliances with people experiencing similar struggle

Recipe for Disaster

- Inappropriate preparation
- Poor support system
- Task overload

Important Notes

- A highly frustrated staff is a highly unproductive staff

- If people do not have a formal outlet to communicate struggles and frustrations, they will do it informally

- Keep your finger on the pulse of your staff's frustration

Culture of Complaint

- Complaining becomes a crutch or coping mechanism for high levels of frustration

- There is little to no evidence that complaining in isolation is detrimental to an organization

- Complaining becomes damaging when it becomes a habit

Psychological Benefit of Complaining "The two V's"

- Venting

- Validation

Adult Drama

Dysfunctional social interactions between adult professionals within a school environment that interfere with the proper implementation of important policies, practices, and procedures that support the proper education of students

Control of Language

Healthy

- Focus on overcoming obstacles and problem solving.

- View colleagues and organization as a resource.

- Pragmatic discussions stay within the locus of control.

Toxic

- Focus on personal effect of the problem and constant, emotionally charged description of the problem.

- View colleagues as trash receptacles.

- Emotional discussions lie outside the locus of control.

Real Difference

Healthy Culture	Toxic Culture
Problem solvers	Complainers

Complaint Challenge

- Take a 30 day moratorium on complaining

- Debrief your staff after 30 days to discuss the impact and change in informal interaction

Suggestions
(TSC Activity)

- Create an opportunity for your staff to voice their frustrations and discuss their attempts to resolve

- Create a formal system of communication to articulate and resolve staff frustrations

- Create agreements around healthy informal communication
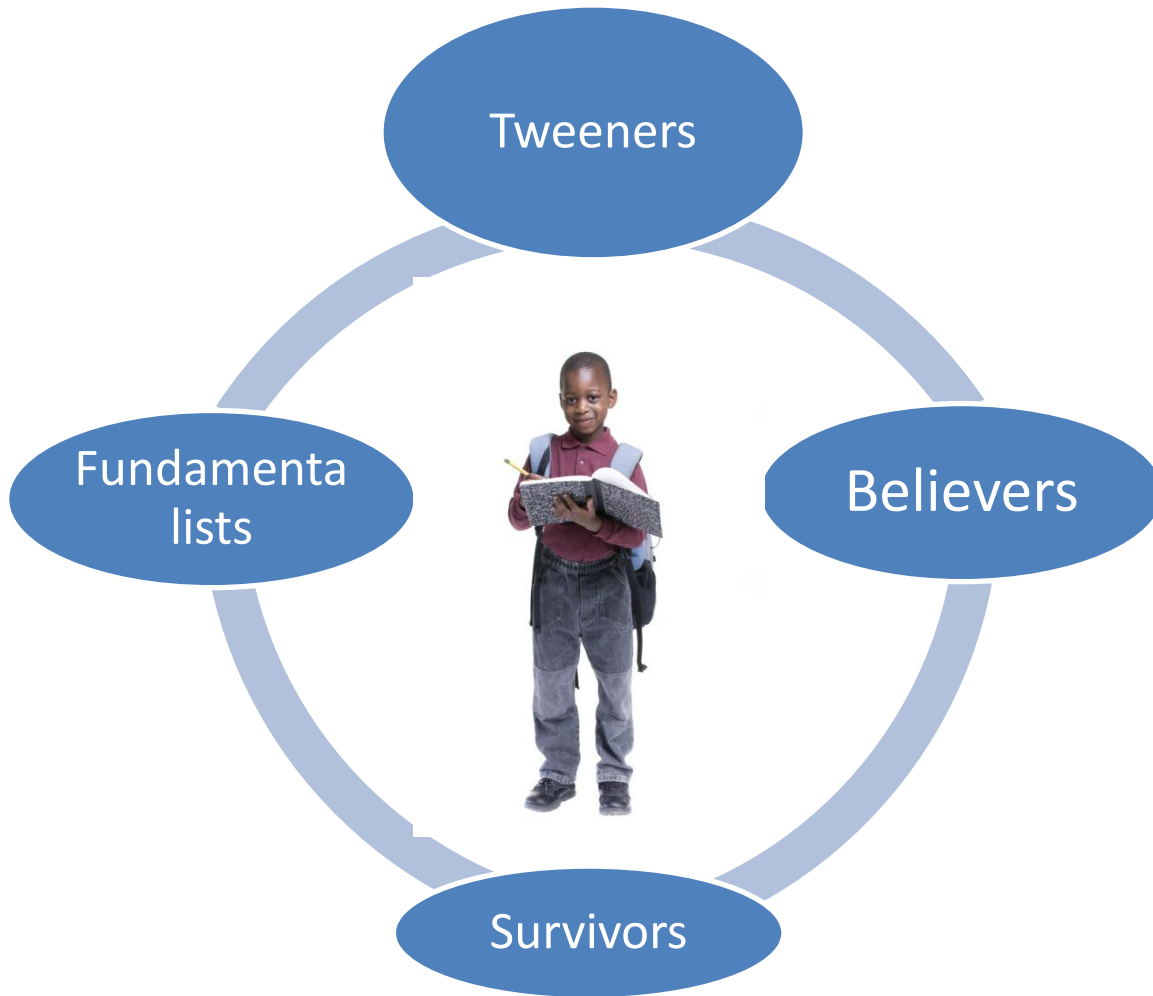
Good to Great, Jim Collins

What do great corporations/organizations do differently than good/average organizations?

1. They seek and confront the "brutal facts"
2. They get the right people on the "bus" in the "right seats"
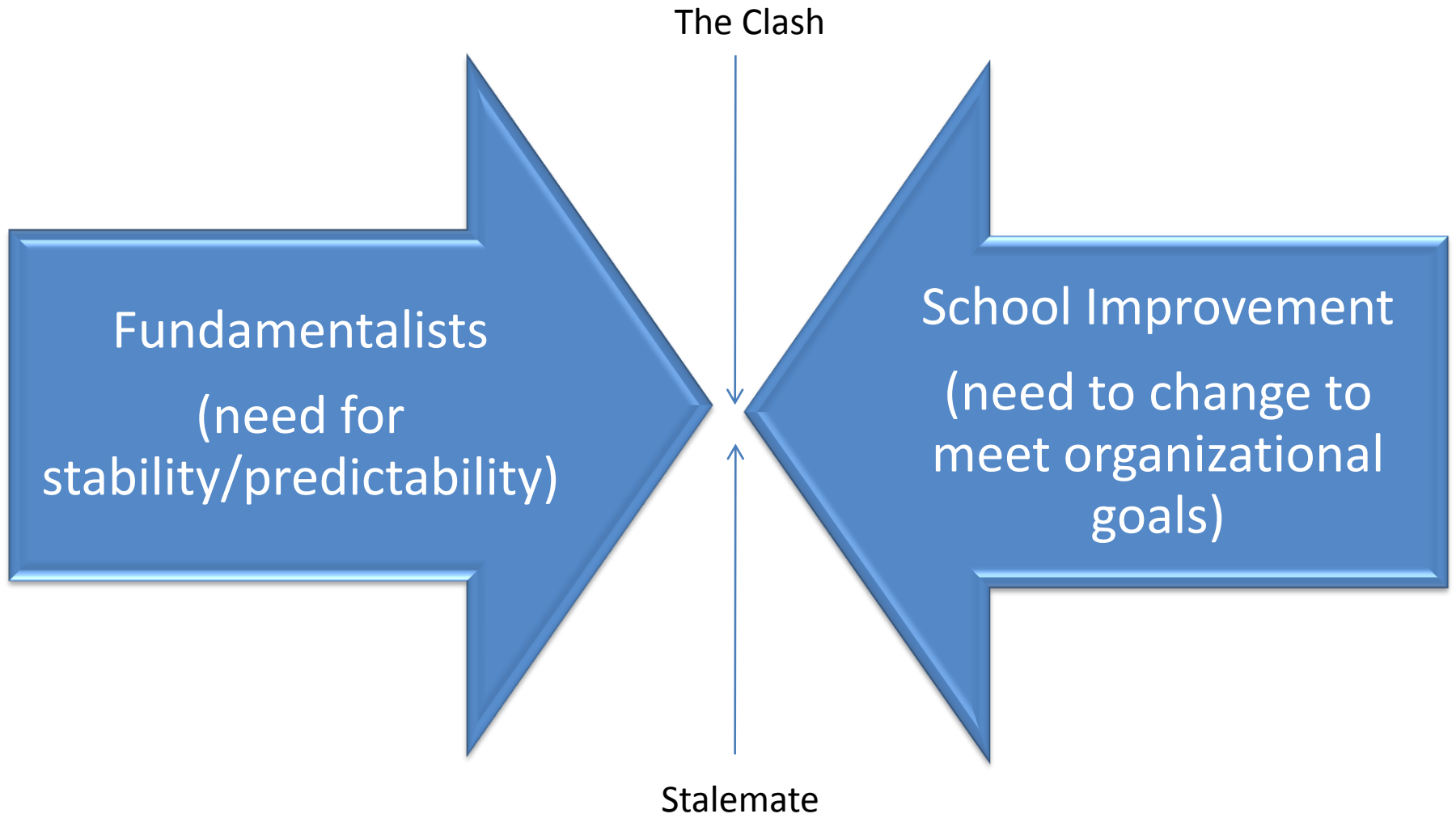
The Quandary

Time to Reflect

- Do you confront the "brutal facts" at your school/district?

- Are all the vital stakeholders on your bus? Why or why not?

The Current State of School Reform

The Clash

Fundamentalists

(need for stability/predictability)

School Improvement

(need to change to meet organizational goals)

Stalemate

Can Fundamentalism Be Reversed?

Fundamentalist
Change Is Not Easy

"Drop Your Tools" Research

- People persist when they are given no clear reason to change

- People persist when they do not trust the person who tells them to change

- People persist when they view the alternative as more frightening

- To change may mean admitting failure

(Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 1992)

Good Leaders

- Transparently communicate purpose

- Foster collaboration

- Build Capacity

- Hold people accountable

Key Principle

Both the Collegial and Managerial cultures must work hand-in-hand in order for the culture to be healthy. Being "correct" is no substitute for being "effective".

Creating Healthy Cultures: A Two-Way Street

Collegial

- Control the language of the informal organization.

- Remove emotional tone (culture of complaint) from informal interactions.

- Focus peers on mission and problem solving.

Managerial

- Develop and maintain healthy organizational vision.

- Develop and maintain healthy policies, practices, and procedures.

- Institutionalize organizational health.

Scenario #1

The board of education has to slash $3 million from next year's budget. They have decided to eliminate the team planning time at each of the district's four middle schools. Teachers will have to teach for an extra period each day and teaching staff will be reduced by four at each site. You are the associate superintendent for instruction. How do you properly facilitate this change?

Scenario #2

Your school has received the highest accountability rating granted by your state. At least 90% of your students meet or exceed state standards in math and reading. The board of education is concerned about the achievement of students with disabilities and they want to see substantial overhaul in the school support system for students with disabilities. You are the principal. How do you facilitate this change?

Scenario #3

Your high school has failed to make AYP for the last five years. Less than 30% of your students meet state requirements in math. 70% of your math teachers are first or second year teachers. The state has communicated that if math scores are not improved by at least 10% for the upcoming school year the school will face total restructuring. You are the math department chairperson. How do you facilitate change and growth?

Transforming Culture

"My greatest hope is that educators grasp this concept and universally dedicate themselves to creating schools that provide adequate guidance to all kids, and that they aspire to become the transformational institutions that make the community a better place to live and our world a better place."

—Muhammad, *Transforming School Culture* (2009), p. 120

What Methods Work in Managerial Culture?

- An Institutional Focus on Learning

- Intentional and Consistent Celebration of Desired Behavior

- A Solid Support System for Tweeners

Shared Mission

The mission question challenges members of a group to reflect on the fundamental purpose of the organization, the very reason for its existence. The question asks, "Why do we exist?" "What are we here to do together?" and "What is the business of our business?"

DuFour and Eaker, PLC at Work, 1998

Developing Mission

- Who are your students?

- What are the areas where their lives could be enhanced through education?

- What will you collectively commit to focus on in order to enhance their lives?

- Mission must have a **SERVICE ORIENTATION!**

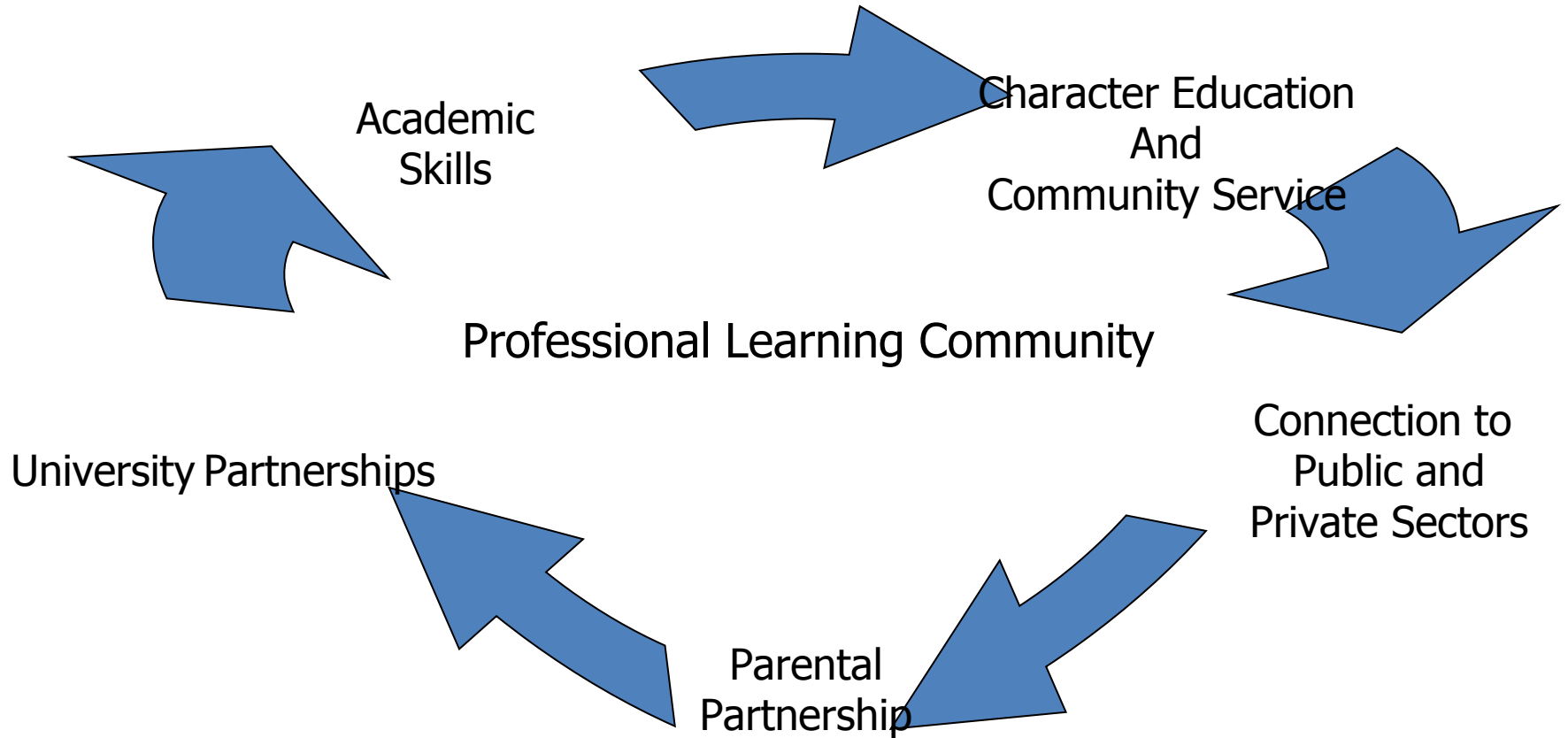# What is your school/district trying to accomplish?

Levey Middle School Mission

"We will work collaboratively to ensure that each student is prepared for post-secondary education"

New Frontier 21 School
A Fresh Approach

Academic
Skills

Character Education
And
Community Service

Professional Learning Community

University Partnerships

Connection to
Public and
Private Sectors

Parental
Partnership

Nine Core Beliefs

1. Schools are places built for the education of children, not for adult employment.
2. Schools play a major role in the future life success of students and their community.
3. Education is a profession, and educators should conduct themselves as professionals.
4. Education is a mission, and educators should conduct themselves as missionaries.
5. Schools are a communities' most precious institution, and they have the power to transform a community.
6. Children are at the center of everything that we do, and our practice should reflect their best interest.
7. We believe that schools must partner with other members of the community in order for the educational experience to be optimal.
8. We believe that character is important and that schools can help shape a child's character.
9. We believe that service to the community is important and that it is essential in a democratic society.

Review Action Plan #1

U.S. Department of Labor

"The number one motivator in the American workplace is public appreciation of effort and commitment"

USA Today, February 12, 2009

Authentic Celebration

- We celebrate what we value
- "Authentic" vs. "Staged" celebrations
- Celebration is for all stakeholders (students, staff, and parents)
- Creates platform and context for Believers to comfortably operate and control language
- Creates welcoming atmosphere for Tweeners who become more likely to be Believers

Review Action Plan #2

Teacher Retention

"50% of teachers in the United States leave the field after five years and that number climbs to 70% in urban and rural schools."
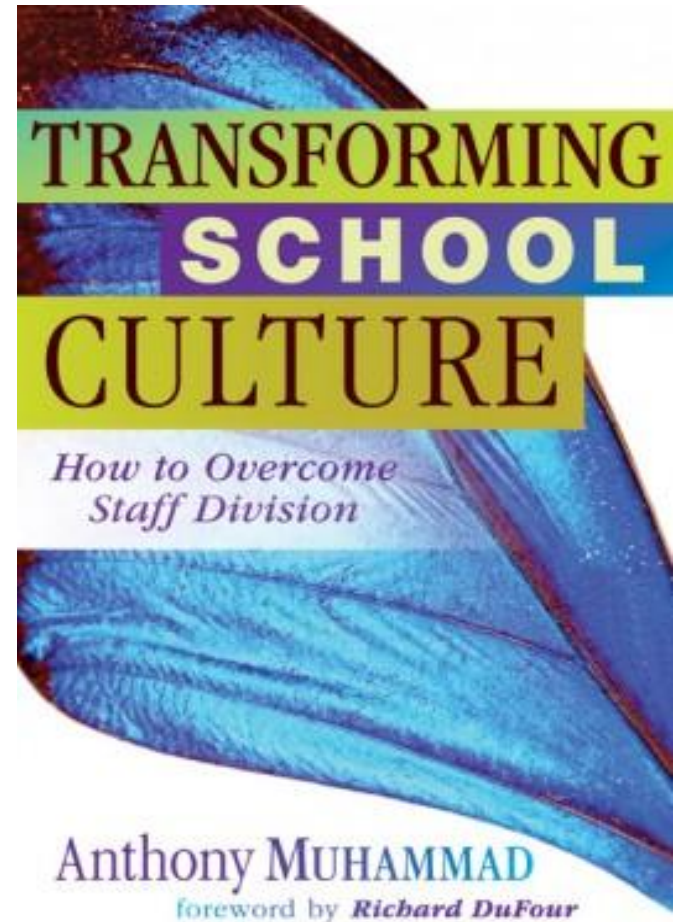
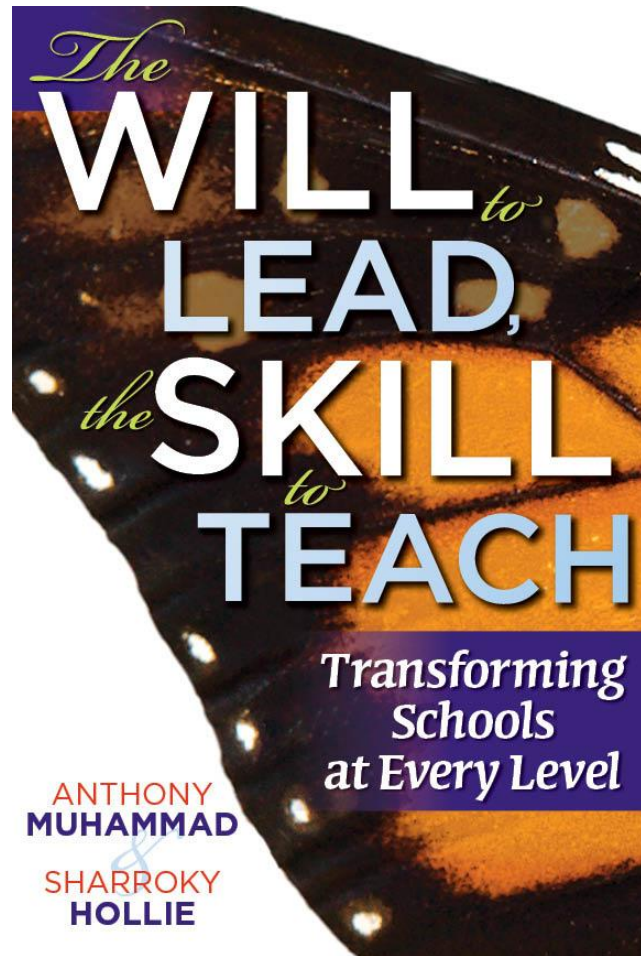Dennis Sparks, Results Magazine, December 2002

Support System for Tweeners

- Traditional "mentor" system has been a failure
- Comprehensive, multi-faceted system works best
- Avoid 'toxic' teams
- Administration must remove the 'wall of silence' and encourage communication about struggles
- Create opportunities to connect with school on many levels
- Skill development and capacity building are essential

Review Action Plan #3

Two Must-Reads for Follow-Up

The WILL to LEAD, the SKILL to TEACH: Transforming Schools at Every Level

ANTHONY MUHAMMAD & SHARROKY HOLLIE

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE: How to Overcome Staff Division

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foreword by Richard DuFour

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