Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division

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Purpose

"The best case for public education has always been that it is a common good. Everyone ultimately has a stake in the caliber of schools, and education is everyone's business."

Michael Fullan, *The* Moral *Imperative of School Leadership* (2003)

Two Forms of Change

- Technical

- Cultural

Technical Change

- Technical changes are changes in learning tools/structure
    1. Collaborative time
    2. Common assessments
    3. Data
    4. Educational Technology
    5. Support Classes

Common Misconceptions about Technical Changes

- Changing the structure will lead to higher levels of productivity("Rearranging the seats on the Titanic")

- Technical changes make up for human deficiencies like poor instruction or unprofessional behavior

- Technical changes will "fix" kids or "fix" schools which are broken (i.e. dress codes, longer school day)

Cultural Change

"Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability."

Schlechty, *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse:*
How to Support and Sustain Educational Innovation
(2001), p. 52

Two Forms of Change

- Technical

- Cultural

Apprenticeship of Observation

- Educators have been socialized in their field since childhood and adopt the norms
- The average educator was a good student
- Educators subconsciously protect a system that was of personal benefit
- Educators implement practices that protect the system (academic obstacle course)

(Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study,* 1975)

Predetermination

- Perceptual (Everything is relative)

- Intrinsic (Victims remain victims)

- Institutional

How would our society respond if the Achievement Gap were reversed?

Pause to Think!

Complete Reflection #1

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"

Peterson(2002), Is Your School Culture toxic or positive? Education World (6)2

"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."

Peterson(2002), Is Your School Culture toxic or positive? Education World (6)2

"Toxic" School Culture

"Educators believe that student success is based upon 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."

Peterson(2002), Is Your School Culture toxic or positive? Education World (6)2

"Frustration" – The Root of a Toxic Culture

<u>Frustration</u> = "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

Good to Great, Jim Collins

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

1. They seek and find the "brutal facts"
2. They get the right people on the "bus" and sit them in the "right seats"

Pause to Think!

Complete Reflection #2

Cultural Wars
(School Crusades)

- The **Believers**

- The **Tweeners**

- The **Survivors**

- The **Fundamentalists**

Believers

Objective:

Success for All Students

The Believers

- Very intrinsically motivated
- Flexibility with students (academically and behaviorally)
- Mission driven/connection to school or community
- Willing to confront negative talk and attitudes towards children, but only under extreme circumstances
- Varied levels of pedagogical and professional skill

Pause to Think!

- Is your school culture focused on success for students or the needs of the adults?

- Are your Believers politically active or docile?

- Are your Believers active in the informal culture?

Tweeners

Objective:

To Find Comfort Zone Within the Organization

The Tweeners

- Loosely-coupled with the school mission
- Enthusiastic about the idealistic nature of school, but have not quite hit the tipping point
- They stay out of school and district politics
- Follows instructions as given by administration creating a 'Wall of Silence' (considered "good" teachers)
- One extreme experience (Moment of Truth) can swing them to be a believer or a fundamentalist

Pause to Think!

- Do you have a significant amount of turnover among your Tweeners? If so, why? If not, what do you do to support and retain them?

- Who supports your Tweeners when they have their "Moment of Truth"?

Survivors

Objective:

Survival

Survivors

- Overwhelming nature of the job or life has caused clinical depression (Burnout)
- No political or organizational aspirations
- Create subcontracts with student to broker a "cease-fire" agreement
- Little to no professional practice is evident
- All members of the organization agree that they do not belong in the profession
- Removal and treatment is the only possible remedy

Pause to Think!

- Do you have colleagues that you feel may be Survivors or in the process of becoming a Survivor?

- If so, have you reached out to him/her? Has administration addressed the issue?

- How have your Survivors impacted students?

Fundamentalists

Objective:

Maintain Status Quo (Leave Me Alone!)

Fundamentalists

- Believe not all children can learn (Social Darwinists)
- Believe that school reform is a waste of time
- Believe in autonomy and academic freedom
- Organize to resist threat(s) to status quo
- Believe that gaps in learning are due to outside forces (students, parents, administration)
- Have varied levels of pedagogical skills

Methods:
The Three "D's"

- Defame

- Disrupt

- Distract

Pause to Think!

- Do you have an active group of Fundamentalists at your school? If so, how have they affected the culture?

- Do your Believers challenge your Fundamentalists?

- Have you witnessed any of the three D's? If so, how has it affected your school?
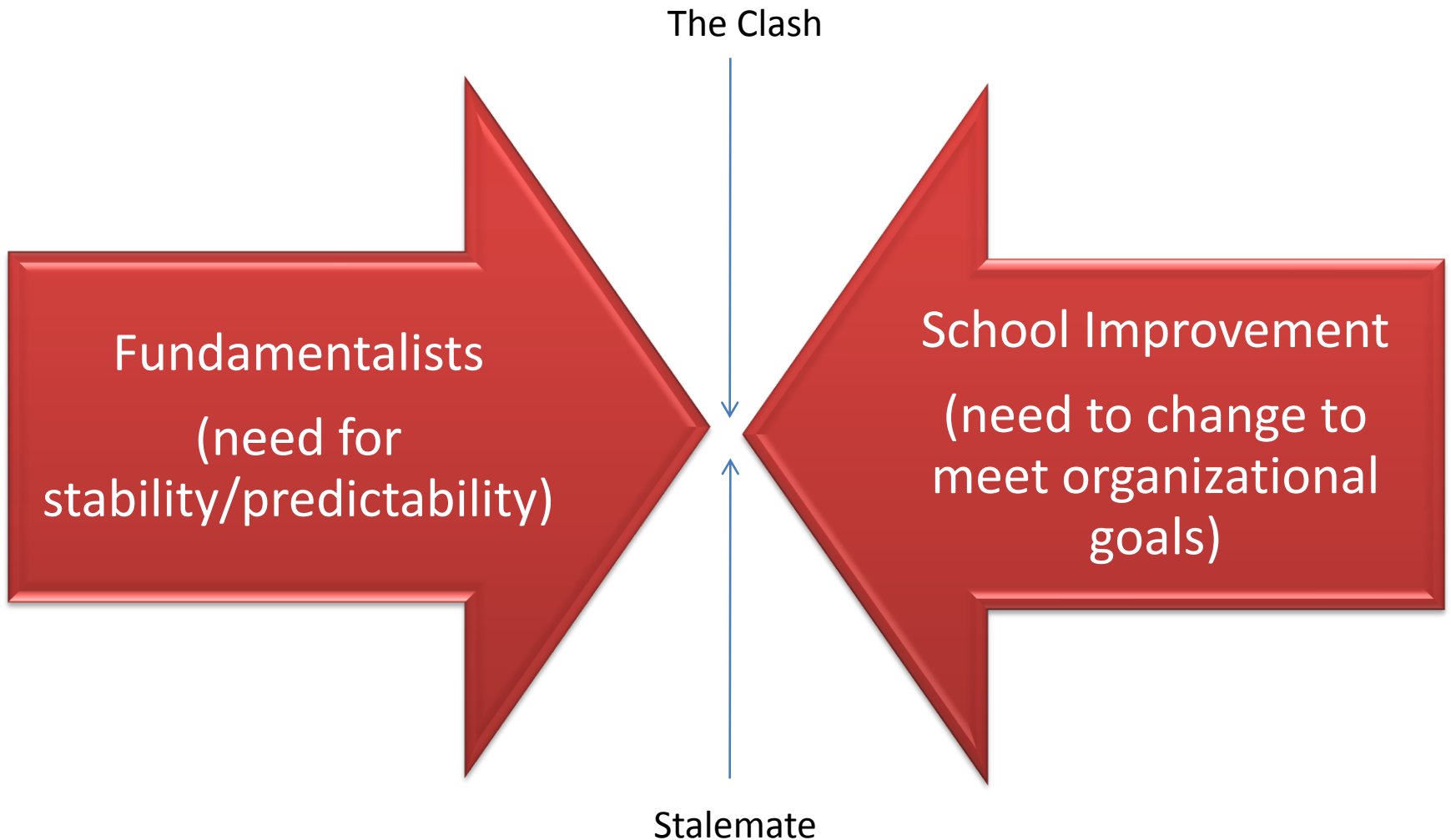
The Real Difference

Believers

- Goal: Success for Every Student

- Accepts that change (the right change) is necessary to improve student performance

- Student interest is more important that personal interest (Public Servant)

Fundamentalists

- Goal: Maintain Status Quo

- Rejects any substantive change if it clashes with personal agenda

- Self-interest is more important than student interest (Self Servant)

The Current State of School Reform

The Clash

Fundamentalists
(need for stability/predictability)

School Improvement
(need to change to meet organizational goals)

Stalemate

Pause to Think!

Complete Reflection #3

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*)*

How do we respond?

- **<u>Level 1</u>** – Make a clear case for change
- **<u>Level 2</u>** – Develop relationships, do not ostracize
- **<u>Level 3</u>** – Increase capacity and consider the context
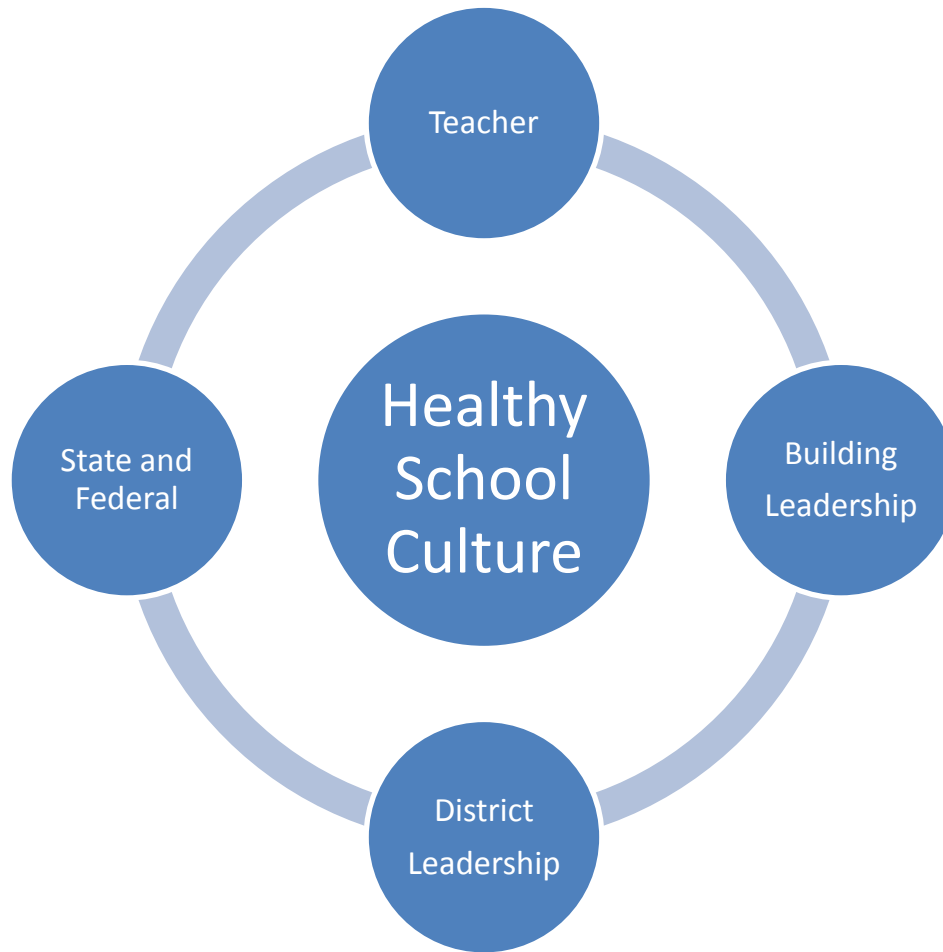- **<u>Level 4</u>** – Monitor Strongly

Behavior, not People!

- The focus in transforming culture is on changing behavior, not getting rid of people.

- The first 3 levels of Fundamentalism are either caused or influenced by inappropriate or poor leadership!

- "Transformation" is different than "Information"

Pause to Think!

Complete Reflection #4

Leadership at Every Level

Creating Healthy Cultures: Everyone Has a Role

Micro (Instructional Staff)

- Control the language of the informal organization

- Remove emotional tone from informal interactions

- Focus peers on mission and problem solving

Macro (Leadership)

- Develop and maintain healthy organizational vision

- Develop and maintain healthy policies, practices, and procedures

- Institutionalize organizational health

What Methods Work?

- An Institutional Focus on Learning

- Intentional and Consistent Celebration of Desired Behavior

- A Solid Support System for Tweeners

A Focus on Learning

- Use students and moral imperative as platform for communication/policies
- Control of language/conversation is vital. Consistently use this language in context of change and transformation
- Competent, confident, and decisive articulation from leadership is essential
- Objectivity is your friend, Subjectivity is your enemy
- Consider skill development in relationship to change

Action Planning

Complete Action Plan Section #1

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

Action Planning

Complete Action Plan Section #2

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

Action Planning

Complete Action Plan Section #3

Two Must-Reads for Follow-Up
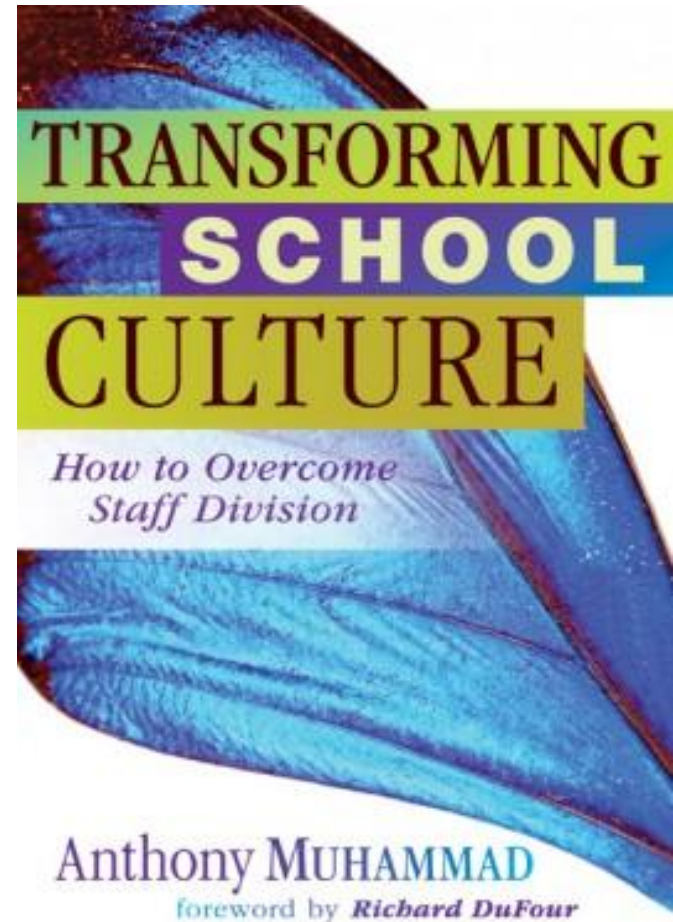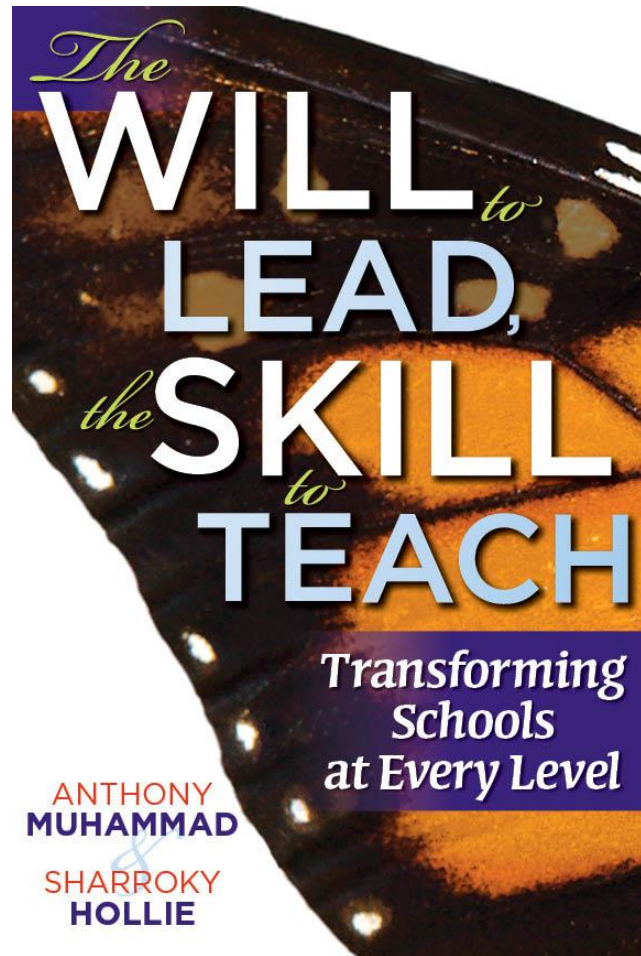
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