



---

Principals as Cultural Leaders

Author(s): Karen Seashore Louis and Kyla Wahlstrom

Source: *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 92, No. 5 (FEBRUARY 2011), pp. 52-56

Published by: [Phi Delta Kappa International](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27922511>

Accessed: 10/04/2013 16:58

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Phi Delta Kappa International* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Phi Delta Kappan*.

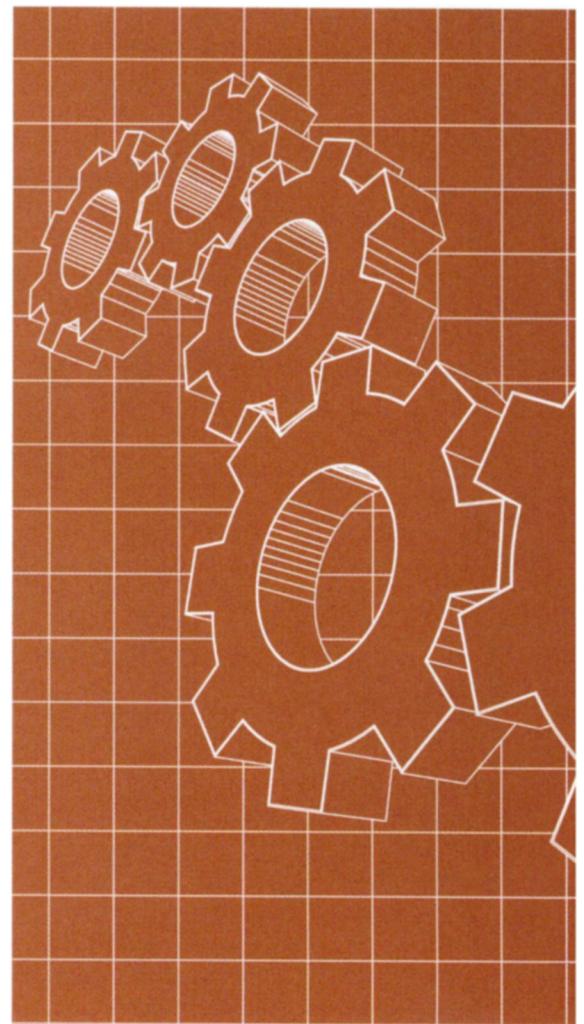
<http://www.jstor.org>

---

# Principals as Cultural Leaders

Principals shape the culture in positive ways when they share leadership and take responsibility for shaping classroom improvements.

**By Karen Seashore Louis  
and Kyla Wahlstrom**



School culture matters. It's a critical element of effective leadership, and there is increasing evidence from both private and public organizations that organizations with stronger cultures are more adaptable, have higher member motivation and commitment, are more cooperative and better able to resolve conflicts, have greater capacity for innovation, and are more effective in achieving their goals.

The central job, and also the most difficult, for school leaders is to shape the school's culture to focus unremitting attention on student learning. Thus, in 2004, we set out to find out how school leaders affect student learning. We talked with over a thousand district office staff, school administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders across the country, and we surveyed more than 8,000 principals and teachers in 164 schools, all within a random sample of nine states that included nearly every type of district.

We found that changing a school's culture requires *shared or distributed leadership*, which engages many stakeholders in major improvement roles, and *instructional leadership*, in which administrators take responsibility for shaping improvements at the classroom level.

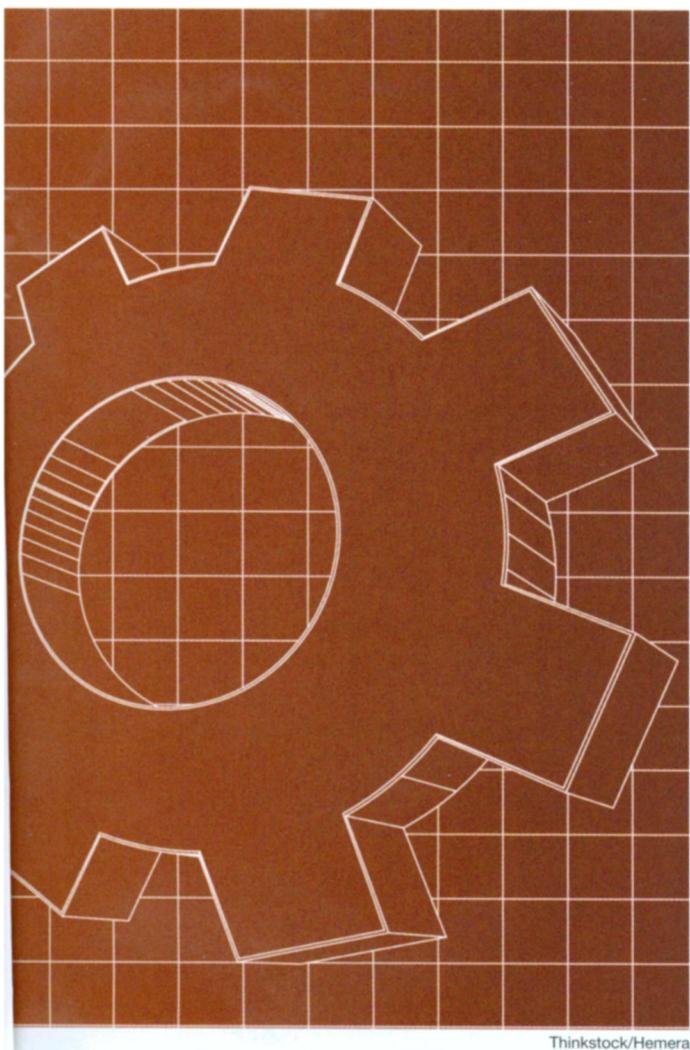
## **CHANGING OUR IMAGE OF "STRONG LEADERSHIP"**

Involving the school community is critical. Although the popular press recites a narrative focused on "turnaround leaders" whose heroic efforts change whole systems, the way in which leaders create the conditions that matter for students is quite different. Schools need to build strong cultures in which the many tasks of transforming schools require many leaders. The common task of improvement provides the moti-

**KAREN SEASHORE LOUIS** is Regents Professor and the Robert Holmes Beck Chair of Ideas in Education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minn. **KYLA WAHLSTROM** is the director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CARE) at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.



Deepen your understanding of this article with questions and activities on page PD 9 of this month's *Kappan* Professional Development Discussion Guide by Lois Brown Easton, free to members in the digital edition at [kappanmagazine.org](http://kappanmagazine.org).



Thinkstock/Hemera

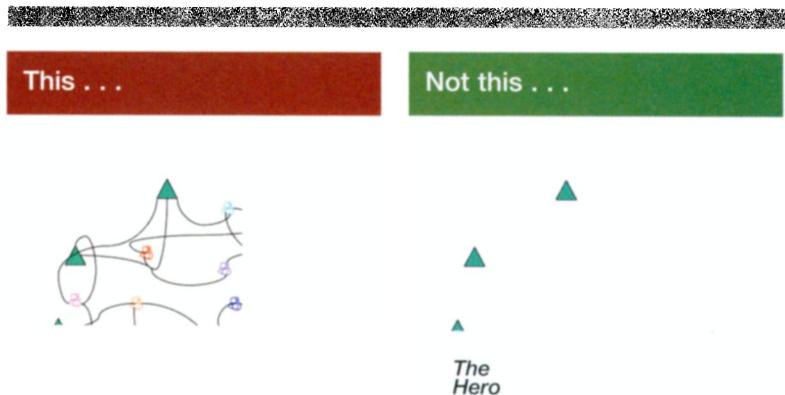
vation for change, not the more traditional leadership paradigm promoted by business gurus.

Madeline Church (2002) asserts that a complex network, in which members routinely connect around “knots” (shared problems and goals), defines a strong culture of interconnectedness. A weaker culture, in contrast, has a single leader who directs the work of others from a position of authority. Silos of individuals or small, isolated groups don’t engender a culture of mutuality and interdependence. However, the “messiness” of group efforts provides strength and safety for all participants and builds the relationships necessary to respond to fluid and changing conditions.

#### WHAT DO WE KNOW?

A typical school’s organizational culture often gets in the way of change. Even with the advent of professional learning communities (PLCs), most work in schools is still done in isolation. There is limited shared knowledge about how teachers teach — and how and what students are learning. This is true not

## What Is a Strong Culture?



From Madeline Church et al. *Participation, Relationships and Dynamic Change: New Thinking on Evaluating the Work of International Networks*. Working Paper No. 121. London: Development Planning Unit, University College London, 2002.

only between schools, but within individual schools as well. Dan Lortie pointed to this problem in his classic work, *Schoolteacher*, in 1975; his 2002 update finds little change after 25 years of effort.

Daniel Duke argues that risk aversion and overwhelming egalitarianism in schools is part of a “crab bucket culture” in which those who stand out are pulled back into the mainstream (2008). Change is thwarted by the sheer urgency of keeping so many young people occupied in reasonably useful activities, which leaves little time for serious reflection on the part of teachers and administrators. The empha-

Neither organizational learning nor professional community can endure without trust — between teachers and administrators, among teachers, and between teachers and parents.

sis is on the short run: Most teachers focus on what needs to be done *this year* with *my students*. All of these features of schools make change and improvement very hard.

But most teachers and school leaders know fundamental changes are needed. Today’s students aren’t the same as previous students — they learn differ-

---

ently outside of school and expect to do so inside as well. The larger culture that students live in has changed faster than schools have been able to respond. And there are many challenges in policies, demographic shifts, and the relentless advance of research-based best (or, at least, better) practices.

So, what kinds of cultures matter in school improvement? And how can principals and teacher leaders affect those? Our study found that three elements are necessary for a school culture that stimulates teachers to improve their instruction.

Principals themselves did not have to model good teaching, but they did require everyone in the school to attend to instruction and learning on a regular (often daily) basis.

#### **A CULTURE OF EXCELLENT INSTRUCTION**

First, teachers and administrators need to engage in deeper organizational learning — learning that uses *all* of the knowledge and resources that can be brought to bear on the core problems of practice in their particular setting. This is not the same as merely implementing best practices or data-based decision making, though those are likely to feed into organizational learning. Rather, it also includes teachers' knowledge, including what they already know but may not have shared and emerging knowledge that they create through action research. The "new" knowledge is generated by doing the tough work of figuring out how all of the information that teachers have can be understood within the specific context in which they're working. Finally, the most effective organizational learning in schools draws on the principles of adult learning that are widely reflected in the emerging professional development standards in education and other fields.

Our study found, in school after school, that principals were the critical link in stimulating the conversations that led to the classroom practices that are associated with improved student learning. Principals themselves did not have to model good teaching, but they did require everyone in the school to attend to instruction and learning on a regular (often daily) basis.

What does this look like from a teacher's perspective? One typical elementary teacher from a small, high-poverty district in the Midwest commented:

Last year, our principal had us do a common assessment once a month in writing, and this year we

added math with it as well. . . . So, every month, we give a writing common assessment and a math common assessment. We give it the first week of the month; the second week, we actually score it; the third week, we look at it and analyze it; and then the fourth week is "OK, what are we going to do now that we have all the information?"

#### **SHARED NORMS AND VALUES**

Second, teachers need to be part of a professional community that breaks down the isolation and short-term focus of the traditional school culture. Professional communities motivate teachers to take collective responsibility for ensuring that all students learn, and they strengthen teachers' resolve to break out of old practices.

There is general agreement about some of the core characteristics of a vibrant professional school community. It involves *collective work* — both permanent and ad hoc teams of the whole staff — in which *leadership and responsibility* for student learning is widely shared. Groups of teachers and their administrators focus on reflective inquiry and learning, with an explicit emphasis on how shared knowledge improves student learning. While there is room for diversity of opinion, there is a core of *shared values and norms* that influence how daily decisions are made. Sharing involves developing common practices and providing feedback on instructional strengths and weaknesses. In order for these characteristics to persist, schools must address the conditions that support or impede the work of PLCs, including attention to the use of time, the use of rewards, and the development of a positive culture.

Our study found that the major factor associated with higher levels of professional community in a school was the principal's shared leadership. Teachers in schools whose principals consistently sought out the best ideas from teachers and parents, and in which there was shared responsibility for carrying out new plans, were able to stimulate the highest levels of student achievement. Creating opportunities for others to have influence increased the principal's personal ability to create a strong culture of change.

An elementary teacher summarized the importance of supportive, shared leadership:

We are the only building in our district where we have a built-in collaborative time once a week. . . . Our principal really helps with instruction, as she is the kind of person who looks into [a new idea] and brings it to the staff [for consideration]. We did a lot of [examining] what is in the realm and philosophy behind the new ideas. She knows that we need time — and, of course, they are never going to be able to give us enough time, but she definitely works with our schedule and tries to figure out ways to give us what we need.

In other words, the principal guided discussions about how to incorporate new ideas, which encouraged teachers to take responsibility for how best to implement them.

### A CULTURE OF TRUST

Third, neither organizational learning nor professional community can endure without trust — between teachers and administrators, among teachers, and between teachers and parents. There is a robust research base to support this contention. A recent study examining improvement in the Chicago school system found that when sustained reform occurred, trust was the foundation that allowed change to happen (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

Our study found that teachers' trust in their principals provides the firm foundation for learning and for forming professional communities. When principals encourage teachers to step forward and have a voice, teachers are more likely to trust the principal. When principals talk about instruction, visit classrooms, and make instructional quality a visible priority, teachers are more likely to trust the principal.

The common task of improvement provides the motivation for change, not the more traditional leadership paradigm promoted by business gurus.

The importance of principal behaviors for creating trust is related by another elementary teacher, who saw the principal as both a goad and a support for her learning:

[The principal] knows his stuff. . . . When I sit down and talk with him about an observation that he has made, the questions that he asks, the suggestions that he gives, I know [that these] are from experience and I can trust them. . . . They are the ones that are going to help move me along the path of instructional excellence. . . . But, then, on the flip side, he also allows me to be the professional that I have been trained to be. . . . [He lets me know that] "I'm going to force you in a positive way to become better, but I'm going to allow you to bring your own personality [and experience] into the classroom and make that happen."

All three of these elements need to occur together. Principals cannot try to share leadership while abandoning their role as an intellectual stimulator for new

ideas and learning. When principals try to stimulate ideas without providing opportunities for teachers to take on leadership or when they have unpredictable patterns of shared responsibility, the effect on teachers' willingness to work hard for change can be negative. Trust is hard to obtain and easy to break, and it requires persistence, patience, and consistency in all leadership behaviors.

Unfortunately, high schools and middle schools appear to have a serious leadership deficit, which results in lower achievement, less professional community, and limited trust. Secondary schools in



- Administrative Program for Principals
- Superintendent Letter of Eligibility

California University of Pennsylvania, with more than 150 years of experience in higher education, offers two dynamic, 100% online programs created for you, the busy working professional looking to advance your career in education, but unable to fit traditional classroom study into your schedule.

All courses are taught completely online, in a cohort format, by experienced school administrators. You will form a professional relationship with members of your cohort as you begin and complete the program together. You can communicate with your professors and your cohort any time through online chats, bulletin boards and e-mail. Both part-time, completely online programs provide a personalized approach in meeting your needs, whether you are seeking a principal's certificate, a master's degree in education, the superintendent letter or simply a way to enhance your teaching and leadership skills.

To find out more about these two programs, or any of Cal U's Global Online programs, contact us at 866-595-6348, e-mail us at [calugo@calu.edu](mailto:calugo@calu.edu) or visit [www.calu.edu/go](http://www.calu.edu/go).

California University of Pennsylvania is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Pennsylvania Department of Education-approved programs.

**CALU**  
GLOBAL ONLINE

California University of Pennsylvania  
Building Character. Building Careers.  
[www.calu.edu/go](http://www.calu.edu/go)  
A proud member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

larger districts, whether they were in a metropolitan core or a large suburb, were less likely than elementary schools to experience leadership that promotes

Changes in school culture affect the way in which adults in and out of the school work with each other to improve practices and create the best learning environments for all children.

teacher leadership and change. While schools with more affluent students had more parent engagement and influence, they were also more likely to maintain the status quo and less likely to have principals whose leadership was associated with energetic efforts to make changes.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL CHANGE

Changes in school culture affect the way in which adults in and out of the school work with each other to improve practices and create the best learning environments for all children. Changes in culture have a strong relationship with instructional effectiveness in the classroom. And they alter how students experience school in other ways as well, because the culture affects how adults behave in the hallways, in monitoring the lunch rooms, and when greeting stu-



*“Before we begin our student concert, note that, due to budget cuts, the role of the drum will be played by banging on inverted paint cans and the role of the flute will be played by blowing breath across half-filled soda bottles.”*

dents as they walk in the door. All of these changes in culture lead to higher levels of student achievement, while also contributing to higher levels of satisfaction among the professional staff.

In some of the schools we studied, the effective leadership behaviors were simple, such as protecting time for team meetings. In others, they were more focused on specific actions to create a strong sense of internal professional community. One example in a medium-size district in the South involved efforts to bridge the gap between middle-class teachers and high-poverty students. In order to bring parents who were marginally employed in multiple jobs into the school, the principal partnered with a local company to install a laundromat in the school building. If a student came in with dirty clothes, a staff member washed their clothes so that they went home with clean clothes. The principal invited parents to wash their own clothes free, and teachers often used that time to talk to parents about their children’s progress. Principals’ efforts to increase parent-teacher collaboration were invariably appreciated by teachers and contributed to success in their classrooms.

The implications of our study are clear. Principals and teacher leaders can improve school culture and student learning by:

1. Supporting individuals and groups to both identify and to preserve what is valuable to them;
2. Guiding a school to “chip away” at cultural features that nullify or inhibit change;
3. Helping members to understand the forces and conditions that will shape the future, ensuring cultural adaptation; and
4. Consistently checking to make sure that aspirations for change are understood and that they result in observable new behaviors in schools.

#### REFERENCES

- Bryk, Anthony S., and Barbara Schneider. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.
- Church, Madeline, et al. *Participation, Relationships, and Dynamic Change: New Thinking on Evaluating the Work of International Networks*. Working Paper No. 121. London: Development Planning Unit, University College, 2002.
- Duke, Daniel. “How Do You Turn Around a Low-Performing School?” Paper presented at the ASCD Annual Conference, New Orleans, March 2008.
- Lortie, Dan C. *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1975 and 2002.