

ADULT PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Our learning at RBT, supported solidly by the research in the bibliography attached, is that there will be no sustainable improvement in student results and no elimination of the achievement gap until leaders and teachers succeed in making strong the norms of behavior between adults listed below.

Many other elements of school practice count, and count heavily (good curriculum; community support; resources; school structures like induction and teacher leadership and common planning time; and others.) But no matter how well these important areas are structured, they will not accomplish on their own what we need for students unless the adults act as profiled below.

Only leaders can make this so. And it has to start from the top.

“School culture” has many meanings. The meaning we focus on here is the culture for the adults, not the students, because the professional relationships of the adults have a tremendous bearing on what life is like for students. The adult culture is the main shaper of the school’s capacity as an organization to learn and improve its results for students. (See bibliography)

Literature on adult culture in schools legitimately considers many dimensions of “the way we do things around here,” including stories and story-tellers, heroes and villains of the past, traditions and celebrations that people look forward to (or dread,) and the degree to which there is celebration, community, and opportunities for human contact with one another. But in our work at RBT we have found certain observable norms of interaction between adults to be central to the culture of a school that gets results for students. Those are the ones we will describe below.

Appreciation and recognition for example, is certainly important in any organization’s “culture.” But it is not as central as the regular behavioral norm of “examining student work together non-defensively and deciding how to re-teach what some students didn’t get the first time we taught it.”



Observable Features of a Strong Adult Professional Culture

1. Safety to take risks, be vulnerable in front of colleagues
2. Non-defensive self-examination of teaching practice in relation to student results
3. Constant use of data to re-focus teaching
4. Frequent teaching in the presence of other adults (Public Teaching)
5. Constant learning about High-Expertise Teaching
6. Deep collaboration and deliberate design for interdependent work and joint responsibility for student results
7. Commitment to implement “Smart is something you can get” in classroom practice, class structures, and school policies and procedures
8. Urgency and press to do better for our disadvantaged students
9. Honest, open communication and ability to have difficult conversations
10. Appreciation and recognition
11. Demanding and high standards for teaching expertise for all teachers
12. Clarity and Legitimacy in decision-making



How Leaders Build Trust and Strengthen Adult Professional Culture

Interpersonal Skills for Building Trust

“You cannot make demands on people you do not have a relationship with.”

-- Hargreaves

Adapted from Tony Bryk’s findings for what a leader does to build Relational Trust:

- Is demonstrably competent
- Keeps her/her word
- Ensures staff gets to know one other as people
- Goes the extra mile to show consideration of individuals beyond formal requirements
- Is present very frequently in halls and classrooms and has useful, short conversations with teachers
- Demonstrates respect for differing points of view through active listening
- Has no hidden agendas. Is transparent and forthcoming with information about what is going on, how processes work, and how decisions are made
- Shows vulnerability and makes it safe to make mistakes (this aims more broadly at faculty-wide ethos of non-defensive self-examination of practice in relation to student results.) Therefore participates visibly as a learner in all PD.
- Shows sincerity, reliability and integrity (strength to stand up for important values and commitments consistently, e.g. children first)
- Keeps us safe from the behavior of toxic people

Overall, a leader who strengthens Adult Professional Culture shows vulnerability and strength at the same time. J. Saphier

Some further comments about “trust”

The faculty and staff trust the leader. Trust that what?

“I trust that you won’t humiliate me or think poorly of me if I make a mistake. Overall, I trust that it is safe for me to be *vulnerable* in front of you.”

“I trust that you will keep your *promises*, that you will do what you say you’ll do.”

“I trust that you won’t withhold *information*, that is, that you’ll be transparent about what is going on in the organization and, with regard to me, that you won’t talk to others behind my back and will give me honest feedback about my performance.”

“I trust that your primary *motives* are for the interests of our clients/our students, not your own career advancement and power.”

“I trust that you will safeguard the openness of our culture by reacting directly to toxic or negative behavior of adults.”



“I trust that when things get tough I can count on you to make firm *decisions* that reflect what is best for students and for our school. Decisions will be made based on objective data.”

What leaders do to build any one of these norms:

Say it – that you value and want to strengthen this norm. And say it again and again in many different ways and settings

Model it – so that people see you acting in congruence with this norm

Organize for it – create events, structures, times, groupings so as to induce and facilitate staff acting in congruence with the norm

Protect it – meaning the people who first step up and risk acting this way, and also preventing competing structures or demands to neutralize the efforts to build the norm

Reward it – meaning the people who act this way get recognition and tangible support from you to continue, and they get it in ways that do not set them up for appearing to be your favorites

A few other characteristics found repetitively in the literature on Adult Professional Culture about successful leaders:

- Manages decision-making so decisions have legitimacy, and makes decisions for the good of the whole (and the good of the students)
- Is not confused by the snowball effect of new mandates and initiatives. Can set limits and say “no.”
- Maintains moral compass to do what is best for students
- Conveys urgency and willingness to deal with conflict
- Models constant learning and participates in PD with teachers as a learner
- Shows gratitude, appreciation, and recognition.
- Nurtures joint responsibility for student results.



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[titles in bold are the most persuasive and important in my opinion- JS]

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