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**Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change<sup>1</sup>**  
**Sharon D. Kruse and Karen Seashore Louis**

**Study Guide<sup>2</sup>**

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This study guide is designed as an easy reference to the key ideas and themes in each chapter of the book as well as to explicitly link ideas to practical applications for leaders in school settings. This guide offers the reader of *Building Strong School Cultures* materials to enhance understanding and to support group discussion and individual reflection about the ideas in the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Kruse, S. D. & Louis, K. S. (2009). *Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.

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## Chapter 3

It is not possible to distribute or intensify leadership in your school without a basic understanding of your current conditions. In addition, without a clear diagnosis of your school's culture, you and your staff may not make the best choices about how to adapt to internal and external pressures. Reaching agreement about how the culture needs to be changed is a first but critical step on the road to improving student learning.

### Key Themes

**Cultural diagnosis:** *Cultural diagnosis is a cyclical process of gathering, analyzing, and reflecting on information* that involves multiple passes –each with a different group of people, and a deepening understanding. Each phase uses new data sources and an ever-increasing circle of reviewers to uncover new understandings about how the school operates and where barriers to and facilitators of improvement are present. We use the familiar “wet, wash, rinse, and repeat” process to explain cultural diagnosis.

**Wet:** Wet requires that you begin to review what *you* take for granted and would rather not change. We argue that you will be better prepared to help others change (and in the process intensify leadership) if you carefully assess your own assumptions about your school's culture. During the first “wet” phase, you will probably feel most comfortable working by yourself or with a few close colleagues whom you trust. Activities in the wet phase may include: cultural pulse taking, walkabouts, and other simple data collection events (we include these and the other examples mentioned in the activities section at the end of this study guide). The point of the wet phase is to create fresh insights and a preliminary diagnosis of how *you* see the school.

**Wash:** Once you have conducted a preliminary diagnosis, you will need to enter a “wash” phase that includes a *sizeable team* – possibly even the whole school staff if your school is small. We call it “wash” because it is during this phase that you may begin to uncover additional issues and feelings that need to be dealt with. Principals and administrative teams should recognize before they start that it is not possible for an *effective* cultural diagnosis to be carried out by a small number of people, and that they cannot mandate change without changing themselves. It is important at this stage to rely on volunteers, because the work is hard and it is important to be honest and transparent. Activities to complete in the wash phase include appreciative inquiry, force field and SWOT analysis and surveys of teachers, students, parents and other members of the school community. Once completed the wash phase should result in data that provides a thorough understanding of the school as the *stakeholders* experience it.

**Rinse:** The best way to think about this phase is as “embedded staff development” because you are focusing on *creating shared meanings* around the important values and goals of the school. Among the things you can do are:

- *Focus on analysis and reflection in a group setting.* This is a particularly useful approach if you anticipate that most people will be open to the diagnostic results obtained during the “wash” phase. You might, for example, present them at a professional development day, and ask the larger group for embellishment, amendments and elaborations. This is useful no matter what diagnostic tool you have used in the “Wash” phase, because there is always room for more analytic and reflective work. If you don’t have a half-day to devote to this activity, you

can do an initial presentation and brainstorming, and use your team to lead further discussions in department or team meetings at a later time.

- *Collect more data; using other stakeholders as informants.* If you have conducted a preliminary force field analysis, for example, you might want to present the results but ask stakeholders to expand on the various forces pressing toward and against your desired ends. If your school has a culture in which people are reluctant to talk about things that aren't going well, this can be very freeing, and be an important first step toward a more open, risk-taking environment. Here is your opportunity to involve those traditionally forgotten or ignored in culture change efforts--parents, community members and students.
- *Plunge further into rinsing through the data.* The point of data analysis is to develop a deeper understanding about how the school has operated in the past (knowledge of what was) and with an eye toward the future (knowledge of what can be). You may wish to use familiar data and include others in conversations about what it means for the school or you may offer up new data for school-wide reflection. Now may also be a good time to compare and contrast data findings to develop a sense about potential agreement or conflicts between groups or members within the school.
- As part of the "rinse" cycle it is important to *surface the emotions that change evokes*. The best-case scenario suggests that your effort goes forward with little resistance and enhanced agreement. The worst-case suggests that you are met with early and on-going opposition and defiant challenge. Trust your sense of the level of readiness within your school. Resistance suggests you may need to spend

more time in the "wet" and "wash" cycles of diagnosis; however, early acceptance doesn't mean you should sprint through those important phases.

The rinse phase should result in widespread participation in efforts to make sense of the school's data and in the development of plans to enhance the school culture with an eye toward fostering increased student learning.

**Repeat:** Repeat, of course, is an on-going phase where culture diagnosis efforts are maintained and used to monitor how the school is changing and in what ways those changes affect stakeholders.

### **Why are these ideas important?**

School leaders in today's challenging educational environment must work to establish strong positive cultures. Diagnosing your school's culture is not just a step that prepares you for changing and improving your school – it is part of the work. Effective diagnostic processes are intimately tied to the development of PCOLT—professional community, organizational learning and trust.

**Diagnosis and Professional Community:** Diagnosis, when carried out in a full wet-wash-rinse cycle will result in building professional community inside the school. By considering your own relationship to others in the building you will openly model thoughtful leadership. In doing so, you introduce (or reinforce) the principles of professional community: focusing on values and norms that you hold in common (what is important to us), reflective discussion (how can we embody what we value in our work), shared practice (what is hard for us to do? Can we help each other?), and collective responsibility (we all own the effectiveness of this school).

**Diagnosis and Organizational Learning:** The diagnostic process involves collecting and analyzing data. When people participate in this activity, they are, by definition, learning together. When they are involved in interpretation and analysis – even through a straightforward activity – they become knowledge generators and users. When others are involved, particularly in the wash and rinse phases, in turning data and information into shared knowledge, your school will be well in its way to becoming a learning organization.

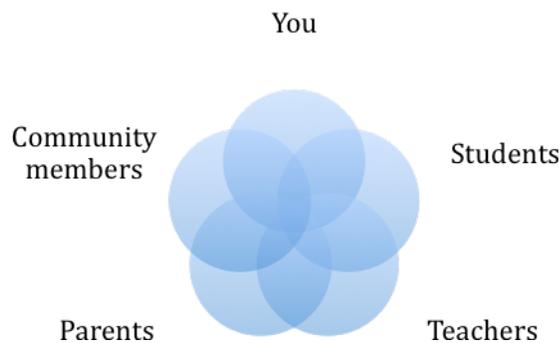
*Diagnosis and Trust:* Diagnosis means that you and others are willing to look at the issues that are embedded in any school setting. The point of becoming vulnerable is to build trust and drive out fear that being honest will result in social or professional “punishment.” The most important part of an effective diagnosis is that people in your school will become willing to look at both the good and the bad, to attribute it to systems and not to individuals – and realize that taking the risk to achieve a balanced and realistic perspective will not mean that individuals or the school suffers.

**Diagnosis and Intensified Leadership:** It is not possible to distribute or intensify leadership in your school without understanding your current culture. The process of diagnosis allows you, with the assistance of others, to set the stage to make the best choices that can be made to support a culture that puts teaching and learning at the center. Although you may begin the diagnosis process alone, the addition of teachers (and others) in the process, highlights their ability to meaningfully contribute to school change efforts. As members see themselves as an active part of understanding the school they also begin to see themselves as capable of taking on an active role in making change.

## Questions, Discussion and Reflection Activities for Chapter 3

### Individual Reflections

- Draw a Venn diagram like the one below. How would you characterize your existing school culture? How would parents describe your school culture? How would teachers describe your school culture? How would community members describe your school culture? In what ways are those descriptions the same? How are they different? What actions might you take to make those descriptions more similar so that a collective identity is developed?



- Complete a quick “*cultural pulse taking*.” On your own, think about the school’s culture and answer the following questions in writing.
  - What is the level of trust and/or conflict among teachers? Are there subgroups or cliques that make focusing on common goals difficult?
  - Are instructional and curricular decisions openly discussed?
  - Do members value each other and do they work together well?
  - Are communication structures open and honest?
  - Is learning something in which everyone is engaged or is it what the kids do?

- Who makes most of the decisions in the school? What happens if people don't agree with a decision that has been made?
- Do people seem to like working here? Who, if anyone, seems to be dissatisfied?
- A “*walkabout*”: On your own (or even better, with another person who knows the school well) spend a day or so simply observing your school. Try not to get distracted with the usual array of “things that need to be done right now” because if you do, you will not be able to be a detached observer. In particular, look for *examples of your school culture in action*, especially the following:
  - Observe what happens as the school comes to life in the morning. What do people see when they first come into the building? What evidence do they have that this is a place where adults and students are learning? What do people look like when they come in the morning? Are they cheerful and happy, or grumpy? How do they greet each other?
  - Watch hard to see how adults interact in public spaces. What do they talk about when they have quick interactions during the day? How do adults treat students in the hallways? How do the various other people in the school, from counselors to cafeteria staff, work with each other and students?
  - Follow a “typical” student (neither a top performer nor a troublemaker) for a half-day, and try to see the school through their eyes. How do students react to each other? How about to their exchanges with adults?

- Look for physical evidence of the school's cultural norms and values.

What physical evidence would an outsider see about the value placed on student learning? Is there any evidence, in the halls or other public places that suggests that student work is valued?

**Group Discussion: (Use your individual reflections to guide your group discussion)**

After completing your initial cultural diagnosis discuss the following questions:

- What did you learn about your school?
- What surfaced that confirmed what you already thought to be true about your school? Do you think others would agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What surfaced as areas of strength or asset? Need or concern?
- In what ways are your schools similar to others in the state or nation?
- What data is needed to complete the cultural diagnosis picture?

## Diagnostic Resources

In the book we offer several ways of collecting data within the school and thinking about your school culture. Here we offer a few tools that may help you in the “rinse” phase before you begin further analysis.

### A Quick School Culture Inventory

In our school...	SD	D	A	SA
Teachers are encouraged to share ideas.	1	2	3	4
Teachers trust each other.	1	2	3	4
Teachers support the philosophy of the school.	1	2	3	4
Teachers have common expectations for student performance.	1	2	3	4
Teachers spend considerable time planning together.	1	2	3	4
Teachers regularly seek ideas from colleagues.	1	2	3	4
Teachers are involved in the decision-making process.	1	2	3	4
Teachers take time to observe each other teaching.	1	2	3	4
Teachers value professional development.	1	2	3	4
Teachers value other teachers' ideas.	1	2	3	4
Teachers' work together is supported by the principal(s).	1	2	3	4
Teachers are kept informed about current issues in school.	1	2	3	4
Teachers and parents communicate frequently about student achievement and success.	1	2	3	4
Teachers are generally aware of what others are teaching.	1	2	3	4
Teachers maintain a current knowledge base about the learning process.	1	2	3	4
Teachers work cooperatively in groups.	1	2	3	4
Teachers work together to develop and evaluate programs and projects.	1	2	3	4
Teachers value school improvement.	1	2	3	4
Teachers who disagree about instructional approaches openly discuss their concerns.	1	2	3	4

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## Getting Wet: A Morning Analysis

Position yourself in a main location in the school to use this data collection tool.  
List and evaluate the major features of the area in which you are standing:

Feature (briefly describe): \_\_\_\_\_

This feature....		
Warmly welcomes people to the building.	Yes	No
Offers direction to someone who may be new to the building.	Yes	No
Sets our school apart from others.	Yes	No
Conveys a sense of who we are as a school community.	Yes	No
Offers strong evidence this school is a place of learning.	Yes	No
Is purposeful.	Yes	No
Is well maintained.	Yes	No
Is remembered by others who visit our building.	Yes	No
Would be missed if it were to be moved or removed.	Yes	No
Has always been in this place.	Yes	No
Is relatively new to the school or this place in the school.	Yes	No
Is student created or features student work.	Yes	No
	Yes	No

List and evaluate the interactions between others as they pass through the area in which you are standing:

People appear to be....		
Happy or cheerful.	Yes	No
Grumpy or ill tempered.	Yes	No
Focused and inwardly oriented.	Yes	No
Socially interacting with others about them.	Yes	No
Professionally interacting with others about them.	Yes	No
Alone.	Yes	No
In small groups.	Yes	No
In large groups.	Yes	No
Mostly with others like them (students with students, girls with girls, boys with boys...).	Yes	No
Mostly in mixed groups (teachers with students, parents with teachers, staff with faculty...).	Yes	No
	Yes	No

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Reflect on the data you have collected in your morning analysis.

- Would others see this area in the same way you did?
- How might their observations differ?
- How might their observations agree with yours?
- What does this data tell you about your school?
- Are there any surprises in your observations?
- How will you use these data as part of your cultural inventory?

### **Adding the insights of others**

If you want to go a little deeper before beginning the “wash” phase, this activity is designed to help you try out the first discovery phase of the appreciative staff. It does not replace a formal Wash phase that will include a broader team.

Talk with at least 3 other members of the school using the following questions. Try to collect examples and stories of the successful programs and practices in which teachers, students and parents engage. When everyone has completed his or her interviews complete the formal summary and discussion protocol that follows.

Questions:

- What about this school makes you most proud? Why?
- What about this school serves the students well? Why?
- What about this school serves the faculty well? Why?
- What about this school serves the parents and the community well? Why?
- What about this school makes it unique? Why?
- If you had to name one or two things that this school could be doing better, what would it be? Why do you pick those as important?

Reflect on the following questions:

- Are there common themes to the stories?
- Do the stories mention common topics, programs, policies or ideas?
- In what ways are they similar?
- In what ways do they differ?
- How might the stories be grouped?
- Try to find 2-3 common themes for each column.