
Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change¹
Sharon D. Kruse and Karen Seashore Louis

Study Guide²

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.

¹ 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 4

This chapter focuses on the theme of intensifying leadership through the school improvement processes. Culture change is not merely a matter of knowledge or skill. The key to creating and maintaining culture change is in getting focused on important goals, communicating those goals and involving others in achieving them. Because this chapter gets at the heart of leadership and culture change, if you are working with a group you may wish to spend more than one meeting on the activities suggested at the end of this study guide.

Key Themes:

The key themes for cultural leadership within chapter 4 include maintaining a focus on the *long-term goals* of the schools, *using PCOLT to intensify leadership* and employing *stories that foster cultural change efforts*.

Long-term thinking: An inevitable fact of school life is that each shift in classroom activities or each encounter in the hall involves split second judgments about what is the next best thing to do. Culture change efforts can get lost in the press to address the day to day pressures of leading and managing a school. But maintaining an eye on the long run has three advantages:

1. It focuses decision making on *core organizational issues and principles*, even when the decisions must be immediate.
2. It supports one's ability to *adapt and innovate* as needed by focusing on how all of the split second decisions add up to student learning.

3. It provides the framework for building *coherent and consistent cultures* around what matters over time to the successes of the school and those that learn and work within.

When leaders focus on the ends (school directions and goals) rather than on the means (e.g., professional or policy development, creating shared governance) the result will generally promote “what matters most.” By focusing on what matters most, rather than becoming sidetracked by more trivial matters more gets accomplished and what gets accomplished is of higher quality and more purposeful.

Intensifying Leadership by Building PCOLT: To encourage long-term thinking a school leader must intensify leadership. Intensified leadership requires thoughtfulness about *who* is supported to take on *what* tasks. It requires that all members be engaged in work that they are well suited to accomplish. PCOLT offers school leaders the *means* to achieve school improvement goals and *ends*. Principals who have developed schools where PCOLT flourishes share the following characteristics:

- *Collective identity* based on shared values, beliefs and direction. A sense of common purpose binds members through an explicit recognition of what matters most. By knowing the direction the school is headed and the ways in which they intend to get there (including professional development, instructional initiatives and shared governance practices), common identity can catalyze participation in leadership.
- *Focus on learning* where the primary activity is on improving outcomes for students. Other activities, ranging from collaborations with communities agencies to developing a specialized curriculum focus are nice, but they should be clearly

viewed as a means to the primary end. In schools where PCOLT is present individual learning leads to shared understandings and collective action toward goals.

- *Philosophy of contribution* where power and authority are shared across the school, and diversity in ways of thinking about problems is encouraged.

Contributions may vary across individuals however; the overall goals should be that all stakeholders are engaged in contributing toward shared success in meaningful ways.

- *Trust* provides the "super-glue" that holds school communities together. Without internal trust faculty and staff cannot engage in the necessary work to improve student-learning outcomes. It also requires leaders to trust that solutions arrived at by others will be better than those they could dream up themselves.

Some of the indicators of PCOLT that you will want to look for in your school are summarized below. This is not an exhaustive list, but it should get you started in thinking about how strong each of these characteristics is in your setting. Focusing on understanding PCOLT in your setting can be a second step in the “wet” analysis that we covered in the previous chapter: It helps you to go deeper into your personal analysis of the culture of your school.

INDICATORS OF HIGH AND LOW PCOLT

Low PCOLT Settings	High PCOLT Settings
Collective Identity	
No clear focus on expectations to guide shared work	Common foci on expectations and goals
Individual ideas about how the school should operate	Shared norms and values about practice
Teachers problem solve on their own	Teachers work together to address problems of practice--on-going discussions contributed to learning from others
Focus on Learning	
Classroom doors are closed	Practice is public
Staff turnover and/or conflict prevent memory from assisting change	Staff develop shared memories to assist new learning and change
Inconsistent and/or specialized professional development	Staff creates both individual and shared expertise
No systematic measures of progress	Measures of progress are shared and understood by all staff
Philosophy of Contribution	
Focus on individual power, authority and control	Shared leadership roles and expectations
Centrally located decision making	Participative decision making
Contrived or pseudo collegiality; false participation in activities	Pervasive and voluntary focus on teaching and learning goals
Trust	
Staff are isolated or in fragmented competing groups	Staff are cooperative and collaborative with a strong community identity
Proliferation of rules to control behavior	Facilitative rules are designed to solve problems
Constrained communication around trivial matters	Open and reflective dialogue about core issues of school improvement
Decisions made by one group are frequently disregarded or undermined by others	Decentralized decision-making is almost always accepted.
External community is disengaged or only marginally with the school	External community is engaged and integrated with the school

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Story-telling: In the last chapter's activities we suggested that you talk to just a few people to get a sense of the stories that people tell about what works in your school. We also suggest that storytelling can be one tool to help you intensify leadership across the school. Stories help to bind people together and, for this reason, are pervasive in our lives. Stories allow us to know who we are as individuals, and where we have come from. Schools too, have a cultural stories. We tell stories about who we were as an organization, and how that affects what we are today. Stories can take on many themes.

- *Stories of success*, achievement and accomplishment help to positively strengthen school cultures, but can also blind members to emerging weaknesses.
- *Stories of disappointment* and failure can reinforce negative school cultures, but in some cases are parts of a larger story of revitalization against the odds.
- *Transformation* stories help school leaders craft a vision for the future. Stories can be used to inspire change, foster increased collaboration, share existing knowledge with others, and spark action.

Telling the right story suggests that you are transmitting a vision for the school. It must *connect* the school's current reality to the future, honoring the faculty and staff, students and community for the work they have already completed and still focuses them on the work still to come. By connecting the past to the future the story helps members to see how the school can grow and change. The right story must also be *understandable*. People must be able to make meaning of the story and to relate it to themselves. *Telling the story right* suggests that you know what you want to say, and that your message is simple enough for people to remember it. Stories that are too long or have too many distinct plot lines are often too hard for people to remember. *Clear* stories focus

attention on the message of the story rather than the storyteller. When stories are *focused*, details and values remain consistent and truthful.

Why are these ideas important?

As we noted in our final comments in chapter one, school culture and student achievement and progress are strongly linked. The ideas in this chapter reinforce that idea by emphasizing how using the knowledge and skills of PCOLT can enhance cultural change efforts and in turn, improve student learning. Leaders in schools with strong cultures do this by:

- *Emphasizing that change is an on-going process.* This involves reminding everyone of the long journey that they are on. Big and small change results when members of the school community accept current programs and practices need to change, but that change is a slow and steady process.
- *Prioritizing a small number of clear and focused outcomes.* Change without a clear end in mind can result in unintended and potential damaging outcomes for a school's culture; trying to change too many things at once (even if they all need to be changed) will diffuse efforts. Repeatedly naming a few goals makes it easier to concentrate on changes needed to get you there and to filter out attractive distractions.
- *Developing an intelligent and focused approach to data.* When goals are clear, strong leaders find meaningful data to show progress. It is important to think beyond annual test data to indicators that can be observed within the school and that are meaningful to members. The trick is to use data proactively – to help

make mid-course corrections to whatever strategies you have chosen to meet your prioritized goals.

- *Identifying measures of success.* One of the most important uses of data is to find ways of measuring both short- and long-term progress. The attainment of short-term goals allows you to celebrate small wins, allowing you to intensify effort and energy for future work. When measures are in place for long-term gain, regular assessment of school processes and practices can be institutionalized.
- *Involving others in the work.* Not only is it easier to create change when others assist in the effort but by involving others--teachers, staff, parents, and community--it is easier to develop a broad base of support for change.
- *Regularly identifying barriers to and facilitators of change.* When you hit a bump it is useful to go back to an informal analysis of the forces that are pressing for change, and those that are inhibited it. Naming and addressing small obstacles and capitalizing on available facilitators of cultural change efforts can proceed more smoothly and result in greater success.
- *Planning for succession and future efforts—by building memories and learning.* Every change effort has the potential to foster organizational learning and memories. While every effort cannot go smoothly, every effort has the potential to teach us things that worked (or didn't.) In any case smart school leaders, consider the opportunities for learning and memory building important aspects of the change effort. By attending to the process as well as the products of change, school cultures can be developed, enhanced and sustained.

Questions, Discussion and Reflection Activities for Chapter 4

Individual Reflections

- In the study guide for Chapter 3, one of the reflection items dealt with the kinds of stories that are prevalent in your school....review what you were thinking:
 - What kinds of stories get told in your school?
 - Who tells them?
 - Are there competing stories?
 - What groups have different stories?
 - Do the stories further or impede a cultural change agenda?

- Use the Yin Yang diagram in the book to further explore the kinds of stories that get told in your school. Using the stories you identified in the exercise above, examine the storytelling culture in your school. Answer and chart the following:
 - List the basic story title (Building a playground, Changing the schedule, developing a new discipline initiative...)
 - Identify the story as a cultural leadership or cultural management story.
 - Label the kind of story it is (Success, disappointment transformation.)
 - Identify the kind of culture (competitive, cooperative or collaborative; helpful, caring, tolerant; exacting, tough or rigorous and/or other terms that might describe) within your school that this story reinforces.
 - What does this story teach? Does it have a moral? If so, what is it?
 - Does this story foster the kind of culture you would like your school to embody?
 - Does this story hinder the development a more positive strong culture?
 - Is this a story you would like to retain or retire? Why?
 - How might you go about retaining or retiring this story?

Story Title	Cultural leadership or cultural management?	Story kind?	What culture does this story reinforce?	Lesson/moral?	Retain or retire?
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- Design a new story (or redesign an existing story you wish to retain) for your school.
 - Choose the kind of story you wish to tell.
 - Clarify your purpose for telling the story by setting a clear goal you wish the story would help you to achieve.
 - Identify who will be the key players in your story.
 - Name whom you wish to recognize or what exemplifies the actions/challenges/values you wish to highlight.

- Develop the narrative.
 - What are the key events and actions you want to talk about?
 - Under what circumstances did they occur?
 - What challenges were faced?
 - How were they overcome?
 - Add an element of interest or surprise; make the story worth listening to.
- Clarify specific outcomes.
 - What happened?
 - How does this story serve to illustrate your cultural challenge or change?

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

- Use the indicators of high and low PCOLT settings to reflect on your school settings.
 - How widespread are each of these indicators in your schools?
 - Based on your reflection, what needs to change?
 - How might you stimulate cultural changes?
- Share existing stories that emerged from your individual reflection.
 - What common themes exist?
 - How do these stories help or hinder your leadership efforts?
 - What changes might you make in the stories you tell to better align them with the goals of your school?
 - Use the story analysis task from the individual reflections and share your answers to the questions from your story analysis. What input do others have to help you use this story to lead or manage your school?
- Share a new story that you began to develop as part of your individual reflection
 - Solicit feedback
 - What was their reaction?
 - How did they respond?
 - What points might you sharpen, drop or expand?
 - Did they clearly link the point of the story to the goals you wish the story to achieve?
 - Practice your story.
 - Be able to tell it smoothly and clearly.
 - Be able to use it to send a consistent message.
 - Talk about where the story fits into your daily work.
 - Plan how you will work it into your conversation with your school community members.
 - Consider how you might make the story part of your school culture.

- Complete the PCOLT inventory (page 11 of this study guide).
 - Where does your school stand when it comes to the PCOLT indicators?
 - Which areas need attention?
 - Which require continued nurturing?
 - Would all school members/stakeholders agree?
 - Where are the substantive areas of disagreement?
 - How might those be addressed?
 - What might be a primary area of focus for your school culture change efforts?

- In what ways do the ideas on this chapter (long-term thinking, High and low PCOLT environments and indicators and storytelling) stimulate you to think about your work differently?

- How do they support or challenge your understanding of your work?

- If you were to summarize the key themes of this book to date how would you do it?
 - What key terms and ideas would you highlight? Why?
 - What draws you to those ideas as opposed to others?
 - How would you share these ideas with other school leaders, faculty and staff, parents or other stakeholders?

Assessing the State of PCOLT in Your School

Reflect on your school's culture by considering each indicator.

In my school...			
	3 Strongly present	2 Sporadically present	1 Weakly present
Collective identity is present. We...			
Share a common focus for expectations and goals.			
Share norm and values about practice.			
Work together to address problems of practice.			
Discuss our learning with others and learn from others efforts.			
A focus on learning is present. We...			
Regularly observe each other teach.			
Share memories that assist in new learning and change.			
Individually create new areas of expertise.			
Share what we know helps students learn, achieve and succeed.			
Share measures of progress with each other and support each other in understanding what they mean.			
A philosophy of contribution is present. We...			
Share leadership roles and expectations.			
Participate in decision-making.			
Relentlessly focus on teaching and learning goals.			
Trust is present. We...			
Cooperate and collaborate.			
Hold a strong communal identity.			
Openly, regularly and reflectively discuss core issues of school improvement.			
Engage the external community in our school improvement efforts.			

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