



# Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division

- By Anthony Muhammad
- Muhammad, A. (2009). *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*,
- Solution Tree Press: Bloomington, IN.
  - A book summary by
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## Some status quo data

- Schools have undergone sweeping changes in the 20th century but still lack a clear consensus about what is needed for all students to achieve.
- Data indicates the system is absolutely broken.
- Gaps between blacks and whites persist. 43% of blacks are below the poverty line. 65% live in single-parent homes. Blacks have twice the teen pregnancy rate. 45% of inmates are black males and 84% of those are illiterate. Blacks have twice the rate of HIV/AIDS.

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# The Latino risk factor

- Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority group in the US.
- Like the blacks they tend to be poor (14% above that of whites) and under employed. They also have increased risk of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.
- Muhammad claims that race is a “risk factor”. Some see poverty as the real risk and since blacks and Hispanics tend to be poor they are more likely to be at risk.

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# Life after dropping out

- High school drop outs suffer from a number of problems on the average.
- They have an average life expectancy that is 9.2 years less than graduates.
- 70% of people in prison are drop outs.
- In addition to other health problems they are also more likely to suffer from mental illness.

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## 21st century issues

- High-paying low-skill jobs are over.
- Companies seeking skilled employees will hire them from other countries if they can't find them here.
- Urban schools receive 30% less funding than suburban schools.
- Muhammad claims that racism and class bias interfere with education.
- Organization protection (unions) for marginal teachers is a problem. (Doug: Teacher Unions backed Obama giving them more power.)

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# It's all about the culture

- Culture is defined as our beliefs, practices, behaviors, and norms of our organization.
- This is where many school officials and reformers fear to tread, but it is the place that holds the biggest keys to unlocking the potential of our public schools.
- Improving schools is very complex and we can't improve until we diagnose what is wrong.

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# Hallmarks of a positive culture

- Staff believe that all children can learn because of what the staff does.
- There is an informal network of heroes and heroines and a grapevine that shares information about what's going on.
- There is set of values that supports professional development, a sense of responsibility for student learning, and a positive, caring atmosphere.

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# Hallmarks of a toxic culture

- Staff relations are often conflicted.
- They don't believe in the ability of all students to succeed.
- A generally negative attitude prevails.
- They articulate the belief in overt ways that student success is based on their level of concern, attentiveness, prior knowledge, and willingness to comply.

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# The book's premise

- Personal belief systems may be the leading indicator of student success.
- Dysfunctional school cultures can serve to maintain achievement gaps.
- It is possible to understand school cultures and manipulate them in order to create a more positive atmosphere.

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# Technical changes don't work

- Technical changes are those that involve changes in schedules, curriculum, learning standards, and materials. They may be necessary but won't work when used by people who do not believe they will work. Reading First is cited as an example of a program that has had little to no effect. (Has it made a difference in Binghamton?)

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# Who is to blame?

- No Child Left Behind mandates that the school is the responsible party. This has created anger, resentment, and pessimism among educators. It also makes the difficult job of changing school culture more difficult.
- Variables beyond school control include: The % of children living with one parent, the % of 8th graders absent at least three times a month, the % of children five or younger whose parents read to them daily, the % of 8th graders who watch five or more hours of TV each day. These variables allow you to closely predict results on state tests.

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# Student outcome focus

- The focus has shifted from the development of individual students to viewing students not as children but as potential liabilities or assets. (Doug: Ever hear things like he's a high two and she's a low three?)
- Muhammad make a point that the accountability movement has had some unintended consequences but only cites data from a single Texas study that seems dated based on the importance of graduation rates in the NCLB plan.

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# Perceptual predetermination

- Prior experiences and perceptions play a powerful role in how a teacher perceives and serves students.
- Race, gender, class, disability status, limited English proficiency, attractiveness, handwriting, and speech influence teacher expectations. Any negative bias will impact expectations.
- We must resocialize teachers who have unfavorable expectations of student performance.

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# Intrinsic predetermination

- This is the student's perception of their probability of achieving success in school. Messages they receive from their environment serve to build or destroy their confidence. The message is so strong that in some communities students feel that if they achieve in school, their peers will view them unfavorably. ("you're acting white")
- The strongest outside influence comes from the parents. If students learn self-defeating attitudes at home the school must provide new and more productive experiences to replace the damaging ones.

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# Institutional predetermination

- The goal of egalitarian education falls short when schools sort students in to remedial and gifted groups. This system will always exclude some students from the full benefit of schooling. Parents often demand more challenging classes.
- If our goal is to create a community that develops the talent of each individual, we must take an honest look at this institutional system of discrimination and segregation and commit to changing it.

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# War of belief systems

- As the result of a study of 34 schools, Muhammad found four incompatible belief systems with members of each group having their own behaviors and tools. He believes that in order to root out toxic aspects of one's culture, a leader must understand how these four groups function to control the environment, react to the influence of others, or just get by.

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# Believers

- These are the people we need more of and they need to be in positions of influence.
- Their goal is success for every student academically, socially, and emotionally. They will work with all other willing stakeholders in any area. They tend to be active on improvement teams, curriculum committees, and voluntary committees. They embrace any change they feel will improve student performance.

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# Believers - intrinsic motivation

- They are willing to go beyond the contractual day to work on new initiatives and serve on committees.
- Their drive does not depend on the influence of leadership.
- Low public perception does not seem to deter them.
- They take fewer days away from work. Studies show that teacher attendance correlates with student performance. Poor schools have more teacher absences.
- They are more willing to purchase classroom materials with personal funds.

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## Believers - connection

- They tend to own a home near the school. Their religious and civic alliances are also in close proximity to their home and work. Their commitment to their profession and their school gives them a sense of stability that appears to shape relationships with students in a positive way.

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# Believers - flexibility

- This is the most striking characteristic.
- They individualize responses to students rather than relying on a rigid set of rules and grading procedures.
- If students are having difficulties they will have private conversations to see what they can do to help.
- When behavior issues arise they rely on positive relationships to work things out. They send 30% as many discipline referrals as Fundamentalists.
- Students respect teachers who stay on them to make them be successful. They know the teacher has high expectations which includes behavior.

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# Believers - positive pressure

- They do not want to see any student fail. This produces observable positive pressure. This is a collection of unrelenting responses to underperformance and apathy.
- Strategies include: calling parents, moving seats closer to the teacher, detaining students from recess, and keeping them after school.
- Expectations do not vary based on subjective observations.

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# Believers - confrontation

- In spite of all their admirable qualities, this group only confronts others in extreme cases. They are content to work with their students and control their own environment instead of actively engaging colleagues in debates about what they think is best for students.
- If believers would engage in intellectual discourse on a consistent basis, they might discover that they can change school culture for the better.

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# Believers - pedagogical skill

- While some believers use cooperative learning, differentiation for student learning style, ongoing formative assessment with immediate feedback, and make effective use of instructional technology, others use lectures, photo-copied worksheets, and low-level question and answer sessions.
- In addition to believing in our students we also need to use available research in effective teaching methods. Conviction must be buttressed with skill.

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# Tweeners

- They are teachers new to a school culture. Mohammad focuses on brand-new educators as they make up 91% of this group.
- They have very loose connections with the school and community and do not have a lot at stake in the organization. They tend to be renters and are huge flight risks. 50% leave education within five years (70% in urban areas). Such turnover hinders student progress.

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## Other tween characteristics

- They are enthusiastic about what they can contribute to society. They do not become teachers to seek financial wealth. They use recent research-based methods and are not afraid to experiment. They believe all their students can learn even if they are not sure how to make it happen.

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# More tween characteristics

- They are reluctant to reveal their faults. They tend to revere or even fear their supervisors. They strive to comply with any directive to please the boss. This can fool the boss into thinking they are good teachers when they are not. Their sunny disposition can mask serious difficulties. Moments of weakness are prime recruiting opportunities for fundamentalists.

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# Keeping the tweeners

- Recognize that all new educators struggle. They need leaders who are willing to listen to their struggles and partner to resolve them. They need access to a stellar example as a mentor on a regular basis. Leaders must work to connect them to the community by making positive connections and taking advantage of the skill and talent they bring to the school. Having close personal connections is key.

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# Survivors

- They are teachers who have given up on practicing effective instruction and focus on just getting to the end of the school year or day. Such teachers have a negative impact on student performance that can be measured years later. These burnouts see no hope of improvement. They are shells of their former selves and are likely to descend into depression. Their condition is real and they require help. They were less than 2% of the teachers Muhammad observed.

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# Student bargaining

- To survive they engage in tacit, informal bargaining with their students in order to gain a peaceful coexistence. Some of the spoils of shrewd bargaining include: use of banned items such as music devices and video games, use of computers for personal purposes, access to nonacademic video, bringing food and drink to class, and the receipt of favorable grades for compliance. This system tends to break down due to unreasonable demands from students and complaints from students and parents who want to achieve.

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# Symptoms to look for

- Frequent use of video as a primary teaching tool
- Use of the computer lab for nonacademic purposes
- Use of worksheets as “busy work” to fill time
- Granting of free time as a reward for behavioral cooperation
- Above all, Muhammad encourages leaders to take action which may include psychological treatment, reassignment, or retirement if possible.

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# Fundamentalists

- These are experienced educators who believe that there is one pure and indisputable way to practice. They protect the status quo and are relentless in their attempts to discourage change. They are the most aggressive and vocal combatants in the war of ideology and like the believers, they are also influential. Muhammad sees their traditional values as being at odds with the change needed to improve schools. They were successful students since age five and want to perpetuate the system that worked for them.

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# The old contract

- The old contract gave teachers control of the curriculum and how it was taught. This gave teachers the right to shut their doors and teach the way they felt was proper. Teacher judgment was the sole criteria for student success and students were blamed if they didn't reach proficiency. If teachers didn't want to meet with others or collaborate that was fine. Parents had limited access and influence and administrators were expected to remove and punish students who did not comply.

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# The new contract

- Curriculum is standardized and developed by a central body. Success is judged by external exams and blame has shifted from failing students to teachers who's students fail. The era of accountability has caused leaders to become more involved in what's going on in classrooms and to focus on instructional data. Fundamentalists feel insulted when pushed to engage in professional development and to use research-based "best practices". They do not view themselves as anti-education, they just disagree with the new era of public education.
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# Fundamentalist beliefs

- They loath accountability initiatives like NCLB and do not agree with the mantra that “all children can learn”. (Some kids just aren’t cut out for school.) They are social Darwinists in that they believe that some people are more fit to survive than others. Some people are doctors and some are garbage men. They give grades that fit the bell curve with a few A’s and lots of B’s and C’s and a few F’s. They are quick to recommend special education testing and placement out of their classroom. They have little empathy for those who don’t excel.

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# Emotional versus rational

- Fundamentalists are active and constantly seek to add to their ranks and gain political power. When they argue they focus on emotional issues such as their personal comfort, convenience, and working conditions. They are attached to their daily routine and do not want to give up any power. They rarely use research to challenge organizational change.

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# Fighting fundamentalists

- Believers must engage fundamentalists if they are to effect change but an emotional battle is not the recipe for success. Reasons for a change must be rational, connected to the school's mission with stated improvement goals, and supported with empirical and anecdotal evidence from multiple sources. This works best in formal settings.

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# Formal & informal organization

- The formal organization consists of all official operations such as committees, teams, and even the PTA.
- The informal organization consists of all the covert alliances that develop within the formal organization. They are governed by those who participate. There are no formal rules and goals may not align with the formal organization. They are often a threat and fundamentalists work very effectively in this manner. Tweeners are their prime recruiting target. Leaders may not detect informal alliances.

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# Expand the public forum

- Leaders need to encourage staff to express their views in the public forum. To do so they need to create frequent opportunities for fundamentalists to voice their viewpoints and be prepared to refute potential arguments against change by making a better public case. Encourage intellectual dialogue about the organization's goals. Leaders should be seen as not trying to perpetuate division among the staff.

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# Defamation

- In the most toxic cultures, fundamentalists rule by intimidation. When a toxic culture is challenged, an all-out personal assault is used on the change agent. This is similar to modern political campaigns that are rooted in the notion that if we publicly destroy and humiliate our opponent, we increase our chances of winning. Fundamentalists choose this tool because it is so effective.

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# Disruption

- When defamation is not enough, fundamentalists turn to disruption and delay the implementation of change initiatives. If the messenger cannot be stopped, the initiative becomes the target. They will dream up multiple worst case scenarios to challenge the change. While questioning the impact of a change is necessary, the difference is that the fundamentalists use such questions to fight the change. They are not concerned with legitimate answers. Their goal is to create as many obstacles as possible.

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## Other tools

- Fundamentalists also identify past ineffective attempts to solve a similar problem.
- They try to represent coalitions that may or may not exist. They pretend that they are the voice of many and speak for those who won't speak for themselves. "I know what the staff needs."
- They try to paint a picture that says to change agents, "This does not work, and everyone knows it except you."

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# Distraction

- This is the least powerful tool. It involves passive-aggressive behavior that says to the staff that they are being forced to change, and they do not agree or like it. This includes nonverbal action such as eye-rolling, negative postures, and engaging in unrelated activity during meetings. They retreat to personal resistance when they fail to block the change. Healthy cultures say that it is more important to practice the change and just say you are going along. Behavior is more important than disposition.

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# In case you haven't guessed

- Fundamentalists pose the biggest and most critical challenge to school seeking to create a healthy culture. They see change as the enemy and operate to protect their narrow view of how things should be done.
- Education is too important for leaders to allow it to be hijacked by those who refuse to change in the face of compelling evidence. They may not have malicious intent but their actions threaten to stunt the growth of schools that serve our most needy students.

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# Level one fundamentalists

- These are the people that persist because they are given no clear reasons to change. Humans have a cognitive need to understand why they should do something and such needs are legitimate. Illogical mandates and coercion don't work in education. NCLB wasn't explained well and created some new fundamentalists. It is the school leader's job to make a solid objective case for change. Data, statistics, empirical research, and clear organizational mission and vision all will help. This will allow for a meeting of the minds that can make change permanent.

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## Level two fundamentalists

- People persist when they don't trust the person who tells them to change. This distrust can be for leaders in general. They think the leaders are motivated by looking good and moving up. They feel leaders make promises to please people rather than providing honest feedback. Leaders are seen as power hungry people who don't understand their plight. Current leaders suffer from mistakes made by previous leaders. To overcome this you need to built trust. This may take time but it can be done.

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# How to build trust

- Do not make promises you can't keep. Stay away from the limelight and exhibit true humility. Use the pronoun we when discussing the school's accomplishments. Allow others the right to their opinions. Know your stuff and lead teachers in the process of learning. Familiarize yourself with the history of the organization and follow the rules you suspect others to follow. Take responsibility and back your people when it counts.

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## Level three fundamentalists

- These are people who resist change because they are unsure if the change will cause them more stress and perhaps not achieve a better result. To address this leaders need to properly prepare staff and allow for incremental implementation. Muhammad suggests a learning center approach that features a team to analyze data, a team to find relevant research literature, eliminating traditional meetings for those that deal with professional growth and learning, and collaboration that focuses on the long haul.

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# Level four fundamentalists

- These are people who refuse to change because change may be admitting failure. They are deeply rooted in their opposition. Their only need is to defend their position. There is not a lot leaders can do to change their thinking. With this group the only solution is strict monitoring which will send the message that standards have changed and the only choice is compliance. Make sure you follow your teacher's contract. If possible assign these people to positions where they can do the least harm and don't give them coveted positions.

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# Focus on learning

- Schools that want to produce a healthy learning environment must be clear on their collective purpose. A mission statement that says clearly “why do we exist” is essential. Rational for why we all need to be on the same page must be given along with a close look at achievement and demographic data. Focus on student strengths and needs and how the school can enhance their lives. Teachers can work in groups during staff meetings on this task with an admonition to be objective. With a mission statement in place the staff can move on to a long-term action plan that can be shared with the community.

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# Impact of formal meetings

- Structured meetings give believers a platform to articulate their belief system. This helps combat what fundamentalists do during informal conversations. It also allows for sharing information and rational that satisfies the level one fundamentalists. The process can invigorate tweeners and reinforce their rational for choosing their career.

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# Celebrating success

- Mohammad cites an example of a school where awards for leadership, curriculum, child advocacy, and creativity were given out every two weeks. The person receiving an award had two weeks to identify someone who deserved it next. Such celebrations need to be for real accomplishments. Students can be recognized for things like being on time or improving. Celebrations that are authentic and all-inclusive help build trust as teachers see a leader who is willing to honor others.

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# Support for tweeners

- Grooming new teachers can be a catalyst for turning a toxic school into a healthy one. It should be the leader's top goal. A team of school members (believers) should be involved in the mentoring process. Leaders need to make it acceptable to struggle and to seek help. Professional development needs to be focused on areas in which new teachers struggle the most. They are: lesson planning, preparation and instruction, the creation of student portfolios, classroom management and discipline, and communication with parents.

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# Collaboration to avoid isolation

- A system of regular collaborative meetings helps avoid isolation and can serve to assist new teachers. They can compliment regular professional development sessions. Schools should use their own staff to teach others when possible. This gives believers an opportunity to push their beliefs and blunts the efforts of the fundamentalists who can only battle in the informal culture.

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# Mohammad's final words

- All students deserve a quality education despite their level of interest and parental involvement. When human beings are at their best, they are thoughtful, ethical, productive, and humane, and quality education can produce all of these attributes. My greatest hope is that educators grasp this concept and universally dedicate themselves to creating schools that provide adequate guidance and support for all kids, and that they aspire to become the transformational institutions that make the community a better place to live in and our world a better place.

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