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Comments by Douglas W. Green, EdD on
Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division
By Anthony Muhammad

I believe that there is much in the way of sound advice for today's educators in this book. I also believe that if the content is not handled with care that it could lead, at least initially, to a more toxic culture. It is clear that the believers are the heroes in this book and the fundamentalists and survivors are the villains. The last thing a school culture needs is for its members to start identifying each other with these labels. I also feel that the stereotypes that Mohammed defines are just that and do not accurately reflect the reality of most staff behaviors.

From what I have seen during my last forty years as an educator, each of us has fundamental aspects and there are times when all of us are just trying to survive until the end of the day. Rather than saying that she's a survivor, he's a fundamentalist, and I'm a believer, I see each of us having some attributes of all three. It's the extreme behaviors of survivors and fundamentalists that we all need to avoid.

In the case of the fundamentalists, its fine to fight change if you can present sound reasons for doing so. Change for its own sake is not good for any culture. We all need to survive but we must avoid lowering our standards and expectations in order to do so. There are a number of recommendations in this book that all schools and their leaders should focus on. Here is my list which represents a condensed summary of the book with my personal emphasis.

- 1) New teachers (tweeners) need to be nurtured by leaders and teacher mentors. If you make sure they end up with more in the way of believer characteristics than those associated with fundamentalists or survivors you can gradually turn a culture around or make a healthy one better. When looking for mentors we need to find those that are strong in the characteristics associated with the believers such as all children can learn, exerting positive pressure, and developing close working relationships that can see students through difficult times without discipline referrals. All new teachers struggle to an extent, so let them know that they need to ask for help rather than hide their problems. Mohammad put this at the top of what leaders should attend to. I only place hiring the best people in the first place as more important.
- 2) School cultures need a well-understood common vision and mission that can be referenced and shared with the school community when new initiatives are discussed. If a new initiative does not address the school mission then it probably should not take any of the limited school resources of money and people power. Efforts to develop common vision and mission can precede long-range planning and serve to promote collaboration, as do formal discussions, which are the next item.

- 3) Formal discussions should be held as much as possible to help combat the informal network that features resistance to change and personal attacks. Promote the use of data and research during such discussions as rational for proposed changes. Faculty meetings should not be devoted to passing out information or presentations not associated with the school's mission. Team and grade level meetings can supplement this effort. Consider having multiple faculty meetings each month with different subsets of the faculty showing up at each one. I think the BTA contract would allow this. Full faculty meetings feature too many people for honest, open, and productive discussions.
- 4) Leaders must work to build trust with the staff. This takes time and can be all blown away with one bad act. Do what you say you are going to do. See yourself as everyone's leader and don't play favorites. Do what you can to protect the staff and back them up when they need it. Show up early, stay late, and don't spend too much time in your office. Look for ways to celebrate teacher and student accomplishments and avoid taking credit.
- 5) One attribute Mohammed mentions for the believers is flexible grading. Teachers that lock in low grades and average them in with subsequent grades can sap the motivation of students who get off to a bad start. I always felt that students should be given a chance to make up work and retake tests so they never feel like they are out of it. This is clearly a problem in our secondary schools where teachers must lock in a grade every ten weeks. This is one area in serious need of a paradigm shift. Student accomplishments should be added to one another rather than averaged. In addition to giving kids more chances to succeed, this approach is more reflective of how real life works. Teachers must focus on helping every child learn as much as possible rather than sorting them out along the bell curve.
- 6) Look for poor pedagogy and work to change it. Muhammad mentions things like busy work, too many movies, time spent on personal and non-academic activity and negotiating with students to gain compliance. Changing these behaviors can be the focus of staff development initiatives.