

Sustainable Culture

By Stephen Chin, Principal of Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School, 2006 to present

This paper aims to provide some insights into my thinking, feelings and actions on building a sustainable school culture.

This paper does not attempt to provide a complete framework for building sustainable school cultures. It hopes to start more conversations and exchanges of ideas and ideologies in our attempts to establish good school cultures.

Assumptions

In this paper, I made several assumptions about school culture:

1. "School Culture" refers to the desirable aspects of a set of beliefs and actions members of the school staff community habitually practice in their professional work.
2. The desired school culture is universal rather than subjective. I stop short of defining this desired culture and only appeal to the reader to apply our own sense and understanding of universal principles, which are instinctively inherent in us human beings.
3. Sustainability is not about status quo and resistance to change. Instead, it is about continuing the desirable beliefs and practices in context of the changing times. Sustainability is about harnessing the strengths and goodness of the existing culture while growing the culture in certain aspects that need changing, without depleting the desired resources and energy in other areas.

Essential Questions

As a new Principal in December 2005, having had observed the effects of change in school leadership, I pondered on several questions about sustaining school cultures.

Will this school's culture continue after a change in leadership?

My colleagues have argued that school leaders bring their personalities into each school they lead and will certainly shape the culture after themselves.

Given our system of appointed school leaders rather than self-selected succession, it seemed that we can, at best, hope that the next leader will see the benefit and strengths of the existing culture and continue to nurture it. Or at worse, resign to the fact that we are not in control of the next leader's intentions, leaving the culture to be changed at the leader's will and fancy.

Can I grow a culture that will in itself be desirable to any new leader? Do I trust the system and my successor to hold similar, if not the same, beliefs and practices in leading a school? Should I even bother about culture that sustains beyond me?

Will the culture grow in spite of us?

If a culture can grow and evolve in spite of me, there is a high chance that it will sustain beyond me. Thus, my attention and energy is directed at establishing a

culture that is independent of me. My recurring question is *“Can this culture grow in spite of me?”*

If the culture depends solely on us as leaders to cultivate and nurture it, then it will not sustain beyond us. A strong and lasting culture is one that grows and changes from within itself.

In Ori & Beckstrom's (2006) story of the starfish and spider, they illustrated the sustainability of a decentralised organization with the starfish which regenerates itself when it is cut into half, while centralized systems is analogous to the spider which dies when its head is severed. They cited several examples of leaderless organizations that thrive without a leader or hierarchical system: the Apache tribe that survive numerous attacks by the Spanish armies, the creation of the Internet without a President, Skype, Craigslist, Wikipedia, Alcoholic Anonymous and the distributed leadership in Toyota.

Whose responsibility?

As a school leader, it seems that our key responsibility is to lead and managed the processes, people and resources of the school so as to serve our mission and achieve our vision. Our efforts seem to be focused on dealing with the present situation, leaving little time and energy to build a culture that will sustain beyond us. We begin building a culture that will be able to deal with the current situation.

However, do we see it as our leadership imperative to build a culture that lasts beyond our tenure as a school leader?

The Harvard Business Review (Oct, 2011) article “The Art and Science of Finding the Right CEO” by A.G. Lafley, former CEO of Proctor & Gamble, found that many CEOs do not have time to plan for their succession, to the detriment of their companies.

“Planning for leadership succession is the most important job of a company's board of directors. But boards and CEOs often neglect this key responsibility because other business matters seem more pressing. At P&G, A.G. Lafley and his board began the process of selecting and developing succession candidates as soon as Lafley took office. Succession planning demands the same coherence, discipline, and thoroughness that governance, enterprise risk, and strategic oversight do.”

Given our context where we do not select our successor, we can at least build a culture that the successor can and want to embrace. Leadership succession and sustainable culture, as Hargreaves & Fink (2006) asserts, is not about us, the leaders. It is about our school that will sustain over time the good works or emerging good works.

“The challenges of leadership succession, of leading across and beyond individual leaders over time are at the heart of sustainable leadership and educational change.”

In Hargreaves & Fink's research, they have encountered numerous cases of short term successes at the expense of long term gains; teachers burning out, leaders resigning, schools losing their focus and drive. In my context, I admit that there is a real pressure to deliver results within a short span of 3 years. The challenge is: what is my response?

What does a Sustainable Culture Look Like?

In my pursuing my belief that the elusive sustainable culture is desirable, if not critical to a school's improvement and growth, I began to change a culture that was highly deferential to authority, with the hope of establishing a self-sustaining, self-directed and self-managed culture of professionals.

Reviewing my efforts and failed attempts over almost 7 years, I recognised 5 elements that became central and crucial to a sustainable culture:

Personal Mastery

Purpose

Relationships

Communication

Ownership

Personal Mastery

Not only efficient, also self-efficacy

A culture is as good as the people who practice the culture. Hence, in all my experiences, personal mastery of each individual member of the school becomes the cornerstone from which the school culture will emerge, strong or otherwise.

Stephen Covey's (1989) first 3 Habits of Highly Effective People defines clearly the requisite principles:

1. Be Proactive – This principle is not about taking initiative and being creative in our actions. It is fundamentally our ability to response to any given situation, especially when it is undesirable. Are we response-able? Are we responsible? Do we take actions in response to a given situation so that it becomes better? This leads to each of us taking the necessary actions towards meeting our goals without blaming people or circumstances.
2. Begin with the End in Mind – This is often mistaken to be a “target setting” principle. It is larger than a year's work target. It is about us as living human beings whose purpose on earth has to be clearly defined by ourselves. We must determine the legacy we want to live and leave. We need to have a clear personal life mission.
3. First Things First – With this principle, we can become efficient as we prioritize the many demands of our time, giving focus and attention to those that truly matter to our legacy.

With these 3 principles, each person will possess self-efficacy, more than merely efficiency. This is fundamental to us being human beings with a purpose in our own lives, giving meaning to the work we are doing.

Purpose

Not only organisation mission, also personal life mission

Our leadership team decided at the end of 2008 to revamp our approach to managing the performance of our staff. We believe that our role is to develop people as whole persons, which will include their personal life missions. We establish our IDEA framework and changed our titles from “Reporting Officers” to “People Developers”. (See Annex A)

In our People Development process, we focus, regularly, on the individual’s personal life mission and find significant overlaps with our school’s mission. Only when there is significant congruence do we proceed to discuss deployment, assignments and development. Appraisal is part of this process as it provides specific and direct feedback for development. Affirmation and acknowledgement is integral to the process.

This change in our supervision culture was not inspired by our full understanding and adoption of Personal Mastery as described in the section above. However, through this change, we have observed that possessing Personal Mastery is core to the individual’s development. Hence, Personal Mastery is now clearly the central philosophy of our People Development approach.

Relationships

Not only collegial, also family

When a person with strong Personal Mastery is clear in his role within the school, he can begin to work effectively with his colleagues to achieve the school’s mission. Wikipedia defines “colleagues” as

“those explicitly united in a common purpose and respecting each other’s abilities to work toward that purpose. A colleague is an associate in a profession or in a civil or ecclesiastical office.”

Over the years, the strong family culture in the school points to a stronger need beyond being collegial. We sacrifice and bond with family members with a special love that does not usually exist in workplaces. I have observed the strong family ties. In our Staff Retreat in June 2012, staff members were invited to write their reasons they love their school. The overwhelming singular response was the love, support and care they feel and get from each other in the school staff members. Additionally, staff members have been observed to spend inordinate amounts of time together, working as well as playing, including taking vacations and traveling overseas together.

Similar to the philosophy on Purpose, relationships and mission should be beyond merely organisational, it needs to reach deeper into the beings of each individual and who they are in their personal lives to give meaning to their work and workplace.

Communication

Not only information, also feedback

Not only top-down, also across

Not only successes, also failures

Many principles regarding communication in an organisation are sound and extensive. These principles and practices exhort the leaders to open their communication channels to be inclusive: hearing different perspectives, gaining feedback and suggestions for improvements and loop back for closure. There is also a clear need for celebrating positive values exhibited by staff members so that the desired culture can be established with and built upon good practices and success stories.

I believe for a culture to be sustained beyond successes and inclusiveness, we need to encourage people to say to each other when someone is not contributing to the shared vision. More critically, we need people with the courage and clarity to address colleagues who are undermining the collective efforts in achieving the core purpose.

What do we say to colleagues who are not contributing or worse, undermining, our purpose?

We need a culture where staff members, who are more family than colleagues, can sustain the desired culture by challenging each other to stay true to their mission instead of waiting for managers to take action, which are often too late or too little.

Ownership

Not empowerment, but freedom

Distributed leadership is an approach to put decision making powers into the hands of those who are closest to the action: people assigned with the tasks. This empowerment will give staff members the ability to make decisions within given parameters so as to bring about effective solutions that matter to their work. However, Kirkpatrick (2011) argues that *“the term ‘employee empowerment’ implies that one person is transferring power to another person. In the real world, what is given can be taken away.”*

In order for full ownership of decisions and outcomes, staff members need to have the freedom to choose their options, supported with reasonable resourcing and held fully accountable to their commitments both to the organisation as well as to their colleagues. Staff members are also accountable to themselves because each of them is seeking to fulfil their personal life mission, which is largely aligned to the school's purpose.

This freedom is embedded in the concept of Self-Management. Kirkpatrick (2011) has co-founded Morning Star which runs with this self-management philosophy. *“In self-management, colleagues already have all the power they need to make anything happen they want to have happen from the moment they start work. Self-management is beyond empowerment. Self-management is power itself.”*

In our current hierarchical system with formerly appointed leaders, to what extent can we build a culture where staff members exercise freedom in their choices so as to bring about the desired outcomes they have each committed to?

We could begin with building teams of colleagues to work towards their common goals, given sizable support and freedom, completely trusting that their purpose and values will govern their thinking and actions to bring about desirable outcomes, if not the actual desired outcomes.

I had the good fortune to witness a glimpse of this freedom of decision and action with our staff choosing their own commitment in our 50th Anniversary Celebrations sub-committees which take care of the various aspects of the year-long commemoration. None of them were assigned their roles as we did with previous major school events. Within each sub-committee, members elected their own leaders, called for their own meetings, drew up objectives and made plans to meet them. There were very few authoritative directions and decisions by me, except for major support and decision with larger impact beyond their scope. As of writing this paper, we concluded 2 major public events: a Community Outreach involving all 1500 staff and pupils in a single day with 4 different programmes for 3 different beneficiaries, and a public performance by our pupils from 5 Performing Arts groups which received raving reviews for their splendid showmanship and high standards.

How do Leaders create the Sustainable Culture?

In reviewing the growth of our learning and caring culture, I sought to find the role of the school leader in this development of a sustainable culture. There are many actions a leader can take to effectively establish a strong school culture, but I am only interested in those that will sustain it, not merely shape it.

Putting together my actions over these years that had contributed to building our culture, I realised that I had been a:

1. Catalyst – *Inspire, but do not become the Core*
2. Fanatic – *Resolute and Disciplined, driven by Love, not by Results*
3. Influencer – *Encourage and Enable, not by authority*

Catalyst

Inspire, but do not become the Core

I believe that a school leader will need to shape the school's culture into what is universally desired with the concurrence of staff members. A school leader will also unconsciously shape the school's culture based on his set of beliefs, values and philosophies lived out daily in his behaviours. However, I have come to realise that the school culture should not be dependent on an individual school leader, though he has a strong influence.

A school leader with insights and foresights, guided by universally acceptable principles, serving the core purpose of educating each pupil in his school to be whole

persons, will be able to inspire staff members through his authentic leadership. As a catalyst, the school leader must inspire people and give them freedom to achieve their common goals as colleagues while holding each other accountable and supporting each other as in a family, fulfilling their personal life missions at the same time. A catalyst *“empowers people and gets out of the way”* (Ori & Beckstrom, 2006).

The challenge in being a catalyst without drawing attention to become the reason for the culture is complicated with being the pinnacle of the hierarchy of appointed leaders. This requires greater conscious efforts to ensure that as school leaders inspires a shared vision and shapes the culture to achieve these goals, the ownership is transferred into the hands of the staff members.

Fanatic

Resolute and Disciplined, driven by Love, not by Results

Hargreaves & Fink (2006) has described many schools with short term successes that do not sustain beyond the equally short term school leader. Collins (2001) also argued that breakthrough will occur after the right conditions are in place, after many years. His extensive research of highly successful and sustainable companies have shown that the flywheel will only be set in perpetual motion after building up disciplined people, thought and actions.

When a school leader is initially appointed into his position to lead a school, there is admittedly a high pressure to deliver tangible and visible results, often within a 3 to 5 year period. Often, there are current practices that hinder such successes, multiplying the pressures on a school leader to demonstrate his credibility as a leader. These pressures are real and if not checked, may erode the beliefs and values that would otherwise keep the school leader on course.

In reflecting on my personal struggle with such pressures, I realised that 2 things kept me going: **discipline** and **love**.

Collins & Hansen (2011) described **discipline** as “consistency of action – consistency with values, long-term goals, performance standards, of methods, over time.” This discipline that was apparently in me is not the stubbornness of not making tough decisions to move processes and change culture for better outcomes faster. Neither is it the blind obedience of hierarchy or rules. I found Collins & Hansen (2011) describing my actions from 2005 to 2009 as I struggled to build a culture of learning and care:

“True discipline requires the independence of mind to reject pressures to conform in ways incompatible with values, performance standards, and long-term aspirations. The only legitimate form of discipline is self-discipline, having the inner will to do whatever it takes to create a great outcome, no matter how difficult.”

Fullan (2001) also affirms such resolute actions as Fanatic Discipline and exhorts:

“when you are on a crucial mission, stay the course against all odds; and be impressively empathetic when it comes to opposition in the early stages.”

Where did I gather enough resolve to be disciplined in my thoughts and actions? I discover it was my **love** for my mission to grow both myself and people.

Farber's (2011) concept of Extreme Leadership is to "*do what you love in the service of people who love what you do*" using LEAP, which he describes as

*"Love generates
Energy, inspires
Audacity, and requires
Proof."*

Farber's Extreme Leadership gave me insight to the source of my strength during my struggles. It was my deep resolve and belief in my personal life mission to grow people that kept me at the work that was needed, in spite of many objections and setbacks, from people who didn't understand my beliefs as well as those who shared my beliefs but not my approach of taking a long time to build the sustainable culture that will deliver the needed outcomes in the long run.

As a school leader, the pressures are fast and real, challenging us to balance the current demands with our long term ideals. Could there be a happy middle?

Influencer

Encourage and Enable, not by authority

When I began my leadership development, I had adopted Kouzes and Posner's (2007) Leadership Challenge which comprises 5 practices:

Model the Way
Inspire a Shared Vision
Challenge the Process
Enable Others to Act
Encourage the Heart

I have now decided to place "Encourage the Heart" after "Model the Way", followed by "Enable Others to Act". This was to reflect my fervent belief in growing people as well as the actions that I had been taking as school leader where I focused on developing people instead of being merely driven by results.

In my current review, I realised that I have been practicing, without sufficient knowledge, Patterson's (2008) framework of influencing change in behaviours by working on "Motivation" and "Ability", similar to Kouzes & Posner's "Encourage the Heart" and "Enable Others to Act". Patterson's extensive study of effective influencers point to 6 sources within the 2 domains (Motivation and Ability) and across 3 levels (Personal, Social and Organisational).

We need to identify critical behaviours that are needed for staff members to adopt in order to enhance their personal mastery. For each behaviour, we need to deal with 2 questions:

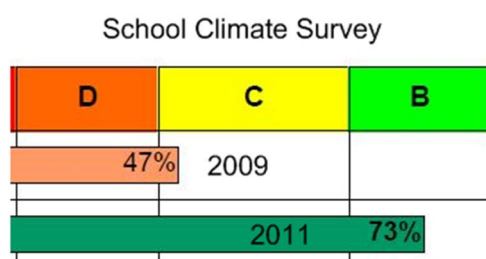
"Is it worth it?"
"Can I do it?"

We must be able to answer in the affirmative to both questions using all 6 sources of establishing a change in behaviour.

Encouraging and enabling people are 2 critical actions of a school leader who intends to grow people, thereby building a culture established and sustained by the people. The challenge is to be able to make changes in people's behaviours without using our appointed authority. The danger is that the observed changes in behaviours are merely because of compliance or fear of the authority we wield, and we are unable to verify if these changes can be sustained in our absence. Therein lies our challenge to aid in enhancing the personal mastery of each staff member so that their changed behaviours are sustained, leading to creating the sustainable school culture.

Conclusion

This paper is a review of my leadership role in building my school's culture which can sustain itself without my further influence. I have yet to fully determine the extent of its sustainability but preliminary signs indicate a healthy trend towards ownership with clear purpose and strong familial relationships. The growth areas remain in some aspects of personal mastery leading to the courage to communicate non-commitment to common core purpose by dysfunctional individuals. This positive growth is further backed by the strong demonstration of staff members' successes in the 50th Anniversary celebrations as described in this paper and the significant jump in the biennial School Climate Survey which measures Staff Engagement.



My work at building a sustainable culture continues with an eye on establishing a hybrid management system which incorporates the philosophy of Self-Management within a leadership hierarchy of appointed leaders. The idea is to engrain the 5 elements of sustainable culture (Personal Mastery, Purpose, Relationships, Communication, and Ownership) deep enough that staff members will not act on blind obedience to authority nor comply out of fear. I do not wish for a culture to stagnate without changes. I believe that a sustainable culture must be able to evolve with any given circumstances so that the purpose is preserved.

I neither resign to fate nor helplessly hope for a successor to continue our good culture of learning and care. I hold a deep belief that the next leader will be equally inspired with building a sustainable culture merely because it is the right thing to do, and there are many such leaders emerging.

Stephen Chin
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Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School People Development Plan (IDEA Process)

Belief

All teachers take ownership of their own professional and career development, guided by their People Developers (PDs).

Approach

All teachers will use the Career Development Plan to chart that career options, develop their competencies and capabilities required for their current roles and responsibilities, as well as their aspirations for their careers.

Deployment

In their **Career Development**, teachers will identify their strengths and areas for growth. They will develop their competencies in order to deliver their targets in their deployed Key Results Areas (KRAs). Their development is aligned to their personal mission and in congruence with their performance and potential affirmed by their PD.

PDs will support and guide teachers in delivering their KRAs' targets, and manage the processes of the **Talent Management** Plan effectively with integrity.

Assessment & Review

With a clearer, structured framework for Career and Talent Development, staff will be better engaged, indicated by

- Climate Survey index,
- feedback to People Developers.

	Stage	Owner	Outcomes	Processes
Career Development	I dentify	Owned by Teachers, guided by PDs	Identify <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - career options and aspirations - strengths and areas for growth based on - personal mission and values - feedback on Performance and Potential from PD - Behavioural Indicators for the 3 career Tracks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOE HR Policy • Behavioural Indicators for Teaching, Leadership and Specialist Tracks • EPMS Process
	D eploy, Develop, Deliver	Owned by Teachers, guided by PDs	Deployment of roles and responsibilities in KRAs aligned to School Strategic Goals . Develop strategies and competencies in order to deliver targets in KRAs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Plan • Deployment Plan • LNA
Talent Management	E valuate	Managed by PDs, evidences by Teachers	Evaluate Performance and Potential of teachers based on evidences from observations, feedback, and scope and quality of outcomes, so as to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give feedback on strengths and learning areas (Identify) - Acknowledge & reward contributions, and develop for appointment (Acknowledge). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appraisal Policy • Matrix of KRAs (Performance) • Behavioural Indicators (Potential)
	A cknowledge	Managed by PDs, evidences by Teachers	Acknowledge quality Performance, affirm Competencies and recognize Contributions regularly. Reward accordingly and develop for appointment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewards and Recognition Policy • Succession Plan