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Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division

By Anthony Muhammad

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division* by Anthony Muhammad. *Transforming School Culture* provides a framework for understanding how school leaders can overcome staff division to improve relationships and transform toxic cultures into healthy ones.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or by an entire team to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote a healthy school culture.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

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Chapter 1

From Status Quo to True Reform

1. How has No Child Left Behind (NCLB) affected the focus, policies, and practices in your school?
2. How would you personally describe school culture, and how would you rate your school's culture (healthy or toxic)?
3. From your personal experience, what happens when technical change precedes cultural change? How does this affect teacher morale and willingness to change?

Chapter 2

The Framework of Modern School Culture

1. How has the shift in focus to hold schools solely accountable for student performance affected you personally and professionally? How has it affected your school and district?
2. Has the concept of predetermination affected your school or district in a positive or negative way? If it has affected your school or district in a negative way, what have you done to address the issue, and have those efforts been effective?
3. Which form of predetermination is most prevalent in your school or district? Are professionals aware of its impact?
4. What percentage of your staff members are Believers, Tweeners, Survivors, or Fundamentalists? How does this division cause problems in your school reform efforts?

Chapter 3

The Believers

1. Why is flexibility with students such an important concept in building a healthy school culture? How flexible is your school or district environment?
2. How do educators develop intrinsic motivation for student achievement? How can educators who lack this trait develop it?
3. Give some examples of positive pressure from your experiences as both a student and an educator. How did positive pressure affect your zeal to learn?
4. Why do Believers tend to be nonconfrontational? How can they confront the damaging paradigms within their school culture and maintain their professionalism at the same time?

Chapter 4

The Tweeners

1. Describe your experience as a Tweener. What do Tweeners need in order to be successful in the field of education?
2. How can we create a stronger connection between the Tweener and his or her school, district, and community?
3. Discuss ways that we can break the “wall of silence” between Tweeners and school and district leadership so they can feel comfortable asking for assistance without fear of losing their jobs? What types of training do school leaders need to meet this challenge?
4. Describe your “moment of truth.” Who helped you through this period? Was the assistance you received systematic or random?

Chapter 5

The Survivors

1. Have you ever experienced workplace stress that caused you to spiral into an ineffective state? What stopped your descent?
2. How do Survivors continue on, and why do some cultures overlook the problems of Survivors, putting both teachers and students at risk? What mechanisms do you have in your district to assist with Survivors?
3. What does it say about a school's culture when there are high numbers of Survivors on staff? What would you do if one of your closest colleagues was a Survivor?

Chapter 6

The Fundamentalists

1. What impact do past experiences have on the development of Fundamentalism? Do you believe that most Fundamentalists view themselves as Fundamentalists?
2. Is resistance to change a characteristic of Fundamentalists only? Can a Believer resist change? Under what circumstances would a Believer resist change, and under what circumstances would a Fundamentalist resist change?
3. How does Fundamentalism cause a roadblock to improvement? How does the “apprenticeship of observation” play a role?
4. Why do Fundamentalists value the bell curve, or normal distribution? How does this paradigm work against efforts toward improved learning for students?
5. Describe examples of how the “Three Ds” have manifested themselves in your professional career in the past. How did you respond in each instance?

Chapter 7

“Drop Your Tools”: A Lesson in Change and Our Best Chance at Eliminating Fundamentalism

1. How can scholarship from other fields assist us in the field of education? Why would an analysis of the reaction of firefighters in an emergency be relevant to the inner workings of school culture?
2. How have top-down authoritarian models affected the culture of schools? What can we learn from the “Drop Your Tools” study as it relates to Level 1 Fundamentalists?
3. Has trust of leadership ever been an issue with you as a professional in your career? If so, how was it resolved? If it has not been resolved, what can be done to resolve this issue?
4. Can the myriad of responsibilities on educators’ plates cause issues that consume their daily agendas? If so, how? What can be done to reduce the influence of these day-to-day issues?
5. Have you ever worked with someone who represented himself or herself as the vanguard of staff rights? How did this person articulate his or her values? How can this type of person be convinced to give up comfort and autonomy for the benefit of students?

Chapter 8

Implications for Practice

1. Can you identify and recite your school or district mission? If not, what are the factors that cause this disconnect? Can a staff truly be unified in purpose if they never formally articulate that commitment?
2. How do you celebrate the prowess of the staff in your school or district? What does authentic celebration produce in an educational community?
3. What are the current components of your school or district program for mentoring new teachers? Does it adequately meet the needs of new teachers? What evidence do you have to support your belief?
4. How can teacher collaboration foster a sense of unity in a school? How can improper collaboration foster staff division? How can you nurture proper professional collaboration in your school?
5. How does professional development impact practice? How does a strong system of professional development support Level 1 Fundamentalists?

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6. Identify four things you will actively implement within the next semester to reduce the influence of Fundamentalists.