

The Intersection of Leadership Style with School Culture

By Patrick F. Bassett

Summary: When our executive search firm ([Triangle/Heads Up](#)) conducts executive searches for school leaders, we do a culture survey of the school (O.C.A.I, the Organizational Culture Assessment Inventory), and we almost always find that most independent schools function within a “**clan culture**,” with deeply embedded and unspoken “ways we do things here.” This is contrasted to how many other types of organizations (*and some independent schools with other, contrasting prevailing cultures*) operate: some within a strict “**hierarchy culture**” of the military and many religious orders; others with an “**adhocracy culture**” of tech start-ups and other nimble entities that find or create opportunities; and others yet with the “**market culture**” of businesses that focus on outcomes. So most independent schools are clans rather than towns, democracies, dictatorships, businesses or religious orders. The head of the clan is the titular leader, but he or she must cultivate the on the ground leaders who manifest the clan's thinking and values if anything is ever going to change. A leader of a clan is expected to lead differently than the command style of hierarchy cultures, the “launch and learn” style of adhocracy cultures, or the “results” style of market cultures. The rub is that some schools run well with any of these contrasting cultures or could benefit from shifting to another one. The intersection of leadership style and current culture becomes critical in the search for a new head, or division head, or academic leader since *any* one of four organizational cultures might serve a school better at one point in time than their current culture. That being said, moving from one culture to another is a Herculean and disruptive process, in most cases.

Leadership Style: Given all of the above, for school and faculty leaders: Are we seeking the Ambassador (consensus-builder), the General/CEO (authoritative, goal-driver) or the Priest/Pied Piper (charismatic visionary)? Why can't we have all three rolled into one leader? Almost impossible to find “God on a good day,” since the leadership styles and values often are mutually exclusive.

OCAI: Organizational Culture Assessment Inventory: Does the leadership style match the culture (easy transition to a new leader), or does the culture need to change and growth requiring adjusting to the new leader whose style will force it (hard and disruptive transition, typically)?

- **The Clan Culture: PFB = a tribe or family:** A very pleasant place to work, where people share a lot of personal information, much like an extended family. The leaders or heads of the organization are seen as mentors and perhaps even parent figures. The organization is held together by loyalty or tradition. Commitment is high. The organization emphasizes the long-term benefit of human resources development and attaches great importance to cohesion and morale. Success is defined in terms of sensitivity to customers and concern for people. The organizational style places a premium on teamwork, participation, and consensus. Leader Type: facilitator, mentor, team builder. (PFB: Ambassador; consensus; bottom-up leadership that builds followership.) Value Drivers: commitment, communication, development. Quality Strategies: empowerment, team building, employee involvement, professional development, open communication. (PFB's weakness factors of this culture: This is how we do things here; distrust of “the other”; change comes slow and hard.)

- Adhocracy Culture: PFB = a tech industry enterprise (doesn't mean "winging it"):** A dynamic, entrepreneurial, and creative place to work. People stick out their necks and take risks. The leaders are considered innovators and risk takers. The glue that holds the organization together is commitment to experimentation and innovation. The emphasis is on being on the leading edge. The organization's long term emphasis is on growth and acquiring new resources. Success means gaining unique and new products or services. Being a product or service leader is important. The organizational style encourages individual initiative and freedom. Leader Type: innovator, entrepreneur, visionary. (PFB: visionary/pied piper; charismatic & inspiring.) Value Drivers: innovative outputs, transformation, agility. Theory for Effectiveness: innovativeness, vision and new resources produce effectiveness. Quality Strategies: surprise and delight, creating new standards, anticipating needs, continuous improvement, finding creative solutions. (PFB's weakness factors of this culture: Destabilizing for those who value good management (predictability and consistency) over disruptive innovation (change). As I often observe, "No change agent ever goes unpunished," eventually.)
- Market Culture: PFB = a business whose service happens to be education.** A results oriented organization whose major concern is getting the job done. People are competitive and goal-oriented. The leaders are hard drivers, producers, and competitors. They are tough and demanding. The glue that holds the organization together is an emphasis on winning. Reputation and success are common concerns. The long-term focus is on competitive actions and achievement of measurable goals and targets. Success is defined in terms of market share and penetration. Competitive pricing and market leadership are important. The organizational style is competitiveness. Leader Type: hard driver, competitor, producer. (PFB: CEO who actually defines and achieves goals.) Value Drivers: market share, goal achievement, profitability. Theory for Effectiveness: aggressive competition and customer focus produce effectiveness. Quality Strategies: measuring customer preferences, improving productivity, creating external partnerships, enhancing competitiveness, involving customers and suppliers. (PFB's weakness factors of this culture: While independent schools are in fact, on the books, multi-million dollar businesses that actually have customers, the most important customers are not the parents but the faculty, because, as we say in higher ed, "The board hires, but the faculty fires": i.e., the collectivist, egalitarian, child-centered culture of faculty and therefore of schools militates against business-grounded decision-making. (PFB's weakness factors of this culture: The stronger the school in the market place (i.e., waiting lists for enrollment), the less inclination to be market-responsive; schools with weak enrollment prospects and finances are much more pragmatic and willing to endure the market responsiveness, since the faculty gets that their very jobs and the future existence of the school depends on it.)
- The Hierarchy Culture: PFB = a "church" or an "army"** with clearly delineated roles and reporting lines and a formalized and structured place to work. Procedures govern what people do. The leaders pride themselves on being good coordinators and organizers who are efficiency minded. Maintaining a smooth-running organization is most critical. Formal rules and policies hold the organization together. The long-term concern is stability and performance with efficient, smooth operations. Success is defined in terms of dependable delivery, smooth scheduling and low cost. The management of employees is concerned with secure employment and predictability. Leader Type: coordinator, monitor, organizer. (PFB: The Colonel, aligning the troops to follow cohesively the battle plan) Value Drivers: efficiency, punctuality, consistency and uniformity. Theory for Effectiveness: control and efficiency with appropriate processes produce effectiveness. Quality Strategies: error detection, measurement, process control, systematic problem solving, use of quality-driving tools (360 evaluations for all, etc.).

(PFB's weakness factors of this culture: workforce (faculty especially) often likes the structure but is skeptical, dismissive, or even distrustful of the "bureaucrats' who run it." Too little "leadership from middle" and less expectation of leadership in favor of "following the rules" and therefore far less adaptation and innovation, typically.

Our Overall Cautionary Note: I've noted often that "No change agent ever goes unpunished," so some sensitivity to change within culture is key. That being said, some disruption is inevitable is change for the better is to occur in the delivery of teaching and learning. And disruptive innovation is what breakthrough thinking, at the end of the day, is all about.

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