

# OVERWHELM CULTURAL INERTIA

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*Reshape School  
Culture to Truly  
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AND Career  
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## **Overwhelm Cultural Inertia: Reshape School Culture to Truly Reflect College AND Career Readiness**

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### **Overview**

As schools embrace the goal of preparing students for college and career readiness, their leaders must engage in the task of reshaping school culture. Adding career readiness to a school system focused solely on college preparation requires extending instruction to the *application* of academic skills and knowledge connected to the real world. Adding career readiness also means including experiences in technical and performance skills, where students begin to explore interests and talents. True readiness also requires development of personal and interpersonal skills and work habits. The instructional practices that contribute to college and career readiness do exist in many schools – at least for some students. The challenge is to elevate these instructional practices to a culture that benefits all students.

The pervasive power of school culture and a resistance to change is often described by the phrase, “culture trumps strategy.” This perspective explains why so many strategic and school improvement plans seem to have little effect on school performance. Culture is deeply embedded in the routines of a school, and a written plan does little to change mindsets and routines. Culture produces a familiar inertia that drives staff to maintain comfortable and accepted practices rather than embrace a new idea. Leaders should not be discouraged by the seemingly immovable object of culture. Instead, they need define their roles and their tasks as taking actions that overwhelm cultural inertia. Changing school culture is not a hopeless endeavor, as so many model schools and exceptional leaders have demonstrated.

The connection between school culture and college and career readiness is critical. Some schools still languish in a culture of low expectations and a failure to believe that all students can achieve. Other schools report overall average student achievement, but ignore the fact that, within that average performance, many students fail to become intellectually or emotionally prepared for further learning or a successful career. Still other schools may believe they are a “good school” but are exclusively focused on “college for all.” They are preoccupied with marketing to students and parents a notion that a diploma and college acceptance guarantee success. Diplomas and college acceptance should be celebrated, but in today’s challenging world they are more of a starting point rather than the finish line. College-focused schools typically have little data on how successful their students are in higher education. The reality is that many students drop out or complete majors that do not transfer into viable employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. The mission of college AND career readiness challenges us to make a closer examination of many school practices.

Educators need to look beyond preparing students for the next grade level or the next test. The goal must be preparing students to be truly college and career ready — not simply earning a diploma or gaining a college acceptance. To achieve this, students need to acquire the skills, attitudes, dispositions and knowledge that matter, as well as plot a personal career path that aligns with both their interests and economic reality. Accomplishing this goal is often blocked or inhibited by the existing school culture.

There is no single blueprint for overwhelming cultural inertia, since each school culture is unique. However, there are actions that leaders can take, drawn from the success of other school leaders and model schools. It requires leaders to analyze and reflect on their school’s unique cultural characteristics and apply the appropriate actions. Diagnose the ailment and administer the antidote or surgically remove undesired cultural characteristics — but it is not as simple as it sounds. Changing culture takes time and perseverance. Along the way, leaders will make mistakes

and sometimes need to pause from making continual progress. Culture change does not have to be a consistent, straight-line progression. However, adaptive and creative leaders can, over time, reshape *any* school culture. Culture does not have to be an immovable object.

This paper provides a framework for addressing and overcoming the obstacle of an unsupportive school culture. Focusing on culture does not eliminate the need for a clear strategy for improvement if a school is experiencing low student achievement. However, a strategy that ignores culture will simply be another good idea wasted. Leaders can use this framework to reflect on their school culture and take actions to enhance their critical efforts to overcome inertia and align the culture with college *AND* career readiness.

## What Is Culture?

School culture refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes and behaviors of staff and students around teaching and learning (Phillips, 1993). School culture is driven by the collective attitudes and values held by staff. These “hidden” perspectives translate into more visible behaviors that become the observable aspects of school culture. For example, a counselor may hold the belief that a career and technical education (CTE) program is not as academically rigorous as an AP science course, the latter also being perceived as a more positive credential on a college transcript. The reality is that both the CTE course and the AP science course are rigorous depending on the student and the teacher. How a student experiences rigor varies a great deal depending on the student’s interests and aptitudes. As for value on a transcript, again it depends on where the student chooses to pursue postsecondary education or other goals. Further reinforcing this belief is the counselor’s own experience: if he or she only took science or other academic courses, he or she might value the science course over CTE. The behavior that results from that mindset is that the counselor recommends that students with good grades take AP science while students with lower academic grades are recommended for the CTE course. This often leads to a *de facto* tracking system in the school culture.

Gruenert (2008) makes a distinction between the terms “climate” and “culture.” He refers to the more visible behaviors as climate and the underlying beliefs as culture.

An organization’s culture dictates its collective personality. Continuing this analogy, if culture is the personality of the organization, then climate represents that organization’s attitude. It is much easier to change an organization’s attitude (climate) than it is to change its personality (culture).

Because many educators use the terms climate and culture interchangeably, this discussion will adopt Gruenert’s distinction but — rather than labeling one climate and the other culture — will identify the two aspects of culture as *culture behaviors* and *culture beliefs*. One is observable and the other is invisible.

In the previous example, it may be very difficult to change the counselor’s long-held beliefs. However, the behavior can be changed by new procedures that enroll students in courses differently — such as allowing more student choice, developing student career plans or polling students’ interests. As these culture behaviors change, the counselor may acquire new experience that will change her or his underlying culture-related beliefs over time.

Cultural behaviors are important because they tend to influence others in the organization. Both written and unwritten rules shape school culture. Culture also encompasses more than staff behavior; other visible characteristics of culture include:

- appearance of buildings and grounds
- comfort and visual stimulation of classroom
- artifacts on display
- physical and emotional safety of students
- socialization of students from various racial, ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups

These visible aspects of school influence other aspects and are driven by hidden or subtle culture-related beliefs.

Like its larger social, political or environmental culture, a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions and practices and is often heavily shaped by the school's institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture, as do other influences such as the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates and the principles upon which the school was founded. School culture is complex and, as new students or staff enter the community, each quickly learns the "rules" and, depending on the intensity of the culture, most seek to fit into the culture.

Culture is the collective way in which an organization behaves. Culture can either support or block new initiatives. Culture is driven by values and beliefs that influence behaviors and support rituals and routines. In schools, there are three primary categories that define the visible aspects of school culture:

- **Conversation - what people talk about.** Examples: agendas at staff meetings, conversations in faculty lounges, what staff tell their friends about a school
- **Artifacts - symbols and objects that are valued and on display.** Examples: student work and photos on display, awards/trophies in the common areas, classroom décor and bulletin boards
- **Procedures - consistency in routines that people follow in doing their work.** Examples: ways staff handle administrative tasks; courtesies in greeting other people; practices governing entrance and exiting school; the content, timing and tone of "morning announcements."

## The Danger of Ignoring Culture

Culture is often neglected in school improvement initiatives and certainly in education policy. The most glaring fallacy of school accountability legislation assumes that all schools are the same culturally. This omission of culture may not be intentional, but it certainly causes many schools to struggle with improvement. School improvement that promotes adoption of research-based practices often yields disappointing results. "The most powerful forms of teacher development are fostered most directly and powerfully by conditions unlikely to be found outside the school" (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999). School improvement that tries to replicate a successful practice from another school must also look inside the school at the culture for the best ways to assist teachers in their ongoing growth. For any innovation to succeed, school culture must be a focus, because social affiliations and sense-making norms have significant impact on success (Harbison & Rex, 2010). The research on schools and business organizations affirms that culture supports or blocks change, and culture interventions are instrumental in *any* change, innovation or reform. It is clear that school culture plays a key role in its performance (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

## Assessing Culture

School culture is complex, and assigning an overly simplistic label of "good" or "bad" to a school is not very helpful in determining a course of action. One popular scale defines a six level typology ranging from Toxic to Collaborative (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The rubric developed around this typology helps school leaders to determine where their school's current culture lies along this scale by examining 12 characteristics. The goal of culture as defined by Gruenert and Whitaker is to reach the highest level of the rubric – "a Collaborative culture." This is a useful rubric to use in determining what could be labeled as "the relative health" of a school culture. However, reflecting only on the health of that culture may not give leaders sufficient information to take appropriate action.

Instead, assessing three separate aspects of the school culture provides clearer and more specific direction to improvement efforts to align culture to school improvement goals, namely by examining the behaviors of leaders, staff and students in three areas:

1. **Health** - Is your culture healthy, anemic or toxic? Every culture can improve, but a toxic culture requires different leadership strategies than a healthy culture.
2. **Intensity** - How entrenched is the current culture and what is the degree to which it influences all activity in the school? A school that has the same staff and students following the same procedures over a long period of time has a greater intensity and level of "entrenchment" compared to a new school, and thus it is a more difficult culture to change.

- 3. Convergence** - To what degree do the prevailing characteristics of the school culture reflect the school's goals? When there is a significant mismatch, disconnect or lack of convergence between culture and school goals, culture is usually the element that prevails.

In the previous example of counseling students toward AP science courses or CTE programs, a school may have a healthy culture that is encouraging students to pursue advanced courses and college enrollment; but if the goal of the school is to ensure that students have viable career goals and are committed to those goals, there may be a **congruence** problem, with current culture being an obstacle to the school achieving that goal.

## A Culture of College and Career Readiness

The current challenge for many school leaders is a lack of congruence between a school's culture the goal of college and career readiness. For school leaders who interpret college and career readiness as meaning simply implementing new student assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), culture may not appear to be much of an issue. Replacing old assessments with new assessments aligned with CCSS seems like a straightforward administrative change to many school leaders. However, the current public backlash against expanded and increasingly confusing testing reveals how powerful an existing but incongruent culture can be in derailing a new initiative.

School leaders need to step up to the goal of college and career readiness in which state assessments are merely one strategy in a broader change initiative. Leaders who embrace a more comprehensive definition of what it means for students to be both college and career ready discover that culture can become a big issue. Even if schools have a healthy culture, leaders may struggle to build a consensus view that changes are necessary. When staff cling to past traditions and seek high levels of academic achievement using the traditional measures of standardized test scores and college-going rates, they have become the entrenched status quo.

Schools generally have strong traditions and cultures that contribute to maintaining that status quo. This tends to make schools static institutions, particularly schools that are perceived to be "pretty good" but, as a result, often discourage risk-taking and innovation ("If it ain't broke, don't fix it."). For example, the organization of schools by grades and the nine-month cycle of the school year perpetuate the practice of promoting students to the next grade level. A system designed around the student mastery of specific competencies or benchmarks would convey a very different culture than one tied to calendar year promotion. In the current culture, after completing K-12 education, the next level is college. Thus high expectations are defined as college acceptance — the "brass ring" of student success. Consequently, courses defined as "college prep" carry more prestige in most schools. Other courses are merely "electives" or "fillers" that take time and interest away from the primary goal of preparing students academically for college.

Embracing a culture of *both* college and career readiness requires a significant culture shift in most schools, not simply adding a new course, a new test or a change in diploma requirements. The "college is everything" mindset is a culture that will prevent — or, at best, inhibit — changes that move students to achieve the more broadly based goal of "life and adult readiness." Leadership Culture does not have to be an immovable object. Strategies must align the school culture to college and career readiness. Building this congruence between current school culture and a culture of college and career readiness is a challenge that confronts almost all of our schools.

Some of the key defining elements of a school culture focused on college readiness compared to a school culture of college *and* career readiness might be summarized as follows:

Culture of College Readiness	Culture of College and Career Readiness
Success defined as a diploma and college admission	Success defined as accumulation of academic, technical and personal skills focused on self-determined future goals
Ignore personal skills and focus on earning credits and passing tests	Opportunities to demonstrate and improve the behaviors and attitudes essential to college and career readiness
Achievement is defined by recall of knowledge	Achievement is defined by application of knowledge and skills
Acquiring career-specific competencies an option for some students	Acquiring career-specific competencies enhances every student's learning
Subjects taught in isolation	Teaching is integrated/collaborative
Teachers teach the "way they were taught"	Teachers teach the way students learn
Instruction isolated from parents and community	Instruction connected to parents and community

### Basic Leadership Practices for Culture Change

Leaders can reshape their school's culture if the assessment of culture is unhealthy, strong or congruent. Following are four leadership practices that have proved to be effective.

1. **Affirm the "Why."** Author, thought leader and business guru Simon Sinek offers a different way of leading organizations so as to bring a focus to their efforts, in what he calls "the Golden Circle." In his book based on his observation of leaders, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, he identifies a way of thinking that is more adaptable to a changing world and inspires others (Sinek, 2009). He emphasizes that many organizational leaders focus on **what** they expect workers to do. In the complex dynamics of schools, it is the school leaders who are able to capture a passion for **why** the organization exists who are better able to significantly improve the school culture as staff work to align their daily work to the core existence.
2. **Promote Valued Behaviors.** Culture is driven by beliefs and values. This is dangerous territory, especially for leaders who approach culture change with a strategy of trying to change staff values and beliefs. Values are important, but leaders should focus on behaviors along with, perhaps, the phrase "valued behaviors" (Edmonds, 2015). Use "valued" to label a few key behaviors that the organization should consistently demonstrate. Leaders should focus on a short list of behaviors that reflect the core values they are trying to establish in the school. For example, having staff greet students daily as they enter a classroom is a valued behavior that will improve student/staff relationships over time.
3. **Redirect Groupthink with Good Questions.** Groupthink can be a powerful constructive or destructive force. Many groups fail to correct the mistakes of their co-members. On the contrary, groups often *amplify* those mistakes. If members are unrealistically optimistic, the group may be even more unrealistic (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015). Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers expand on this idea with suggestions for school leaders in the context of added stress: ". . . as standards and testing are being challenged, evaluation methods are questioned." The loudest voices of a few may establish the impression that the school is doing well and public criticism is unjustified. Groupthink simply echoes this impression. Leaders, however, must avoid joining in the groupthink and seek to redirect by asking questions such as, "How can this

school do a better job with ALL students?” or “What can we learn from models where ALL students do better?” (Berkowicz & Myers, 2015). It is the groupthink that arises around preserving the comfort of the status quo that harms organizations.

- 4. Tell Stories that Reinforce Preferred Culture.** Storytelling is one of the most important practices for leaders. In Howard Gardner’s *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, he shares a common trait of all effective leaders; “leaders achieve their effectiveness largely through the stories they relate” (Gardner & Laskin, 1995). Storytelling is one of the few ways to connect knowledge with emotion effectively. Stories help make sense of information through narrative. The best stories are those that can capture the head, the heart and the hands of listeners. By telling those stories that illustrate “valued behaviors,” leaders begin to reshape the school culture.

## A Backpack of Leadership Strategies

Beyond the basic strategies, there is a broader set of generic leadership practices that can be applied depending on the needs of the school organization.-A school leader needs a backpack of resources similar to a hiker’s backpack. The hiker needs:

- **treatment** resources such as a first-aid kit for medical emergencies
- **energy** resources — food and water
- **protection** such as sunscreen or rain gear

These three types of resources — treatment, energy and protection — also describe the types of strategies that leaders can use to overcome a static and counter-productive culture. Note: Another white paper, “Overwhelming Cultural Inertia: Leader’s Backpack,” describes these strategies.

Finally, hikers and leaders benefit from being able to locate their position relative to the destination.

## A GPS for College and Career Readiness

When hiking familiar trails, hikers know the route and can enjoy the experience without worrying about getting lost or reading a map. This comfortable experience of hiking can be compared to the conditions in many schools, where a culture of focusing on preparing students for the next grade level, hopefully moving on to college, etc. is familiar territory for educators, who can continue following their comfortable route and enjoy the experience. However, when we introduce college *AND* career readiness into the equation, that comfortable route takes on a very different experience and the hikers and educators alike, may find themselves uncomfortable in uncharted territory. The environment around them is unfamiliar and they become unsure of their destination. They desperately need a map.

Finding our way in the world has become much easier since we have added a new device to our navigation toolbox — the GPS (Global Positioning System). A GPS instrument provides a well-marked map. It also has the exact position of where we are on the “trail” and what the route is to our destination. This convenient technology has made it much easier to find our way in unknown territory.

As schools negotiate the new terrain of college *AND* career readiness, leaders often wish they had a GPS that would give them greater detail about the unfamiliar environment, show them exactly where they are and automatically map a route to the destination. Although no one has developed a smartphone app that would provide a very clear roadmap on how to improve schools, tools *do* exist that offer many of the elements needed to map the way towards the goal of college and career readiness for all students.

The Career Readiness Institute (CRI) has created the *Career Readiness Self-Assessment*. Building upon over a decade of cataloging the best practices in America’s most rapidly improving schools by the Successful Practices Network, the CRI has developed a series of checklists that serve as the equivalent of a school leadership GPS — to guide schools toward the destination of college and career readiness. This self-assessment enables leadership team members to

identify more precisely where their school community is in relationship to changing terrain. Since schools are already comfortable in mapping their progress towards college readiness, the checklists focus primarily on career readiness. However, many aspects relate to both college and career readiness as partially overlapping goals - and several checklists relate to both outcomes.

The *Career Readiness Self-Assessment* examines school characteristics in three areas.

1. **Results** encourages leadership teams to reflect on their overall student learning results and look beyond the limited measures of state academic assessments. The checklists encourage schools to examine achievement in stretching students beyond the minimum and also including measures on student performances and developing Life/Career Abilities or “soft skills.”
2. **Culture** considers the existing culture of the school to determine whether it enables or hinders a school improvement or change initiative. Examining current behaviors related to school culture gives leadership teams a more precise identification of aspects of culture that need to be changed over time.
3. **Practices** focuses on instructional planning, instruction and student support services that are necessary to develop career readiness.

This set of assessment checklists includes one section that provides school leadership teams with a structure to reflect on the frequency of positive behaviors that reflect the desired school culture. The leadership team rates on a five point scale the degree of frequency of that behavior. The ratings on these scales give leadership teams a “read” on the overall Health, Intensity and Convergence concepts mentioned above in the section on Assessing Culture.

The *Career Readiness Self-Assessment* is a powerful new resource to guide schools in their planning. Leadership teams can learn more about the self-assessment by visiting the Career Readiness Institute website <http://cri.spnetwork.org/> or viewing this podcast overview <<https://youtu.be/YdDKyKW1-Ug>>. Administrative and teacher Leaders and should not feel overwhelmed when hiking through the new terrain of college and career readiness. There are tools and data, the educational equivalent of a GPS, which can guide them to this destination.

## Summary

Existing school culture does not have to be an immovable force that inhibits any change. There are leadership strategies that can change the visible aspects of culture and eventually lead to more lasting change in the underlying beliefs and values of the institution and its community. The key for leaders is not to ignore culture by assuming that introducing a new tactic or adopting a best practice will be effective. Leadership strategies also need to match the unique needs of the school and existing culture. Carefully assessing a school’s culture and applying appropriate leadership strategies will lead to reshaping the culture to support college and career readiness for all students.

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## Organization Snapshots

- Successful Practices Network (SPN)** is a not-for-profit organization founded in 2003 through a generous gift from Bill and Bonnie Daggett, is committed to helping educators create a culture of rigor, relevance, and relationships for all students. SPN works with schools, districts, regional education centers, state departments of education and other partner organizations to share resources (including its widely used *WE™ Surveys* that measure perceptions of students, teachers, administrators, and parent/community stakeholders about their schools), data, research (including findings from its multi-year study of best practices that was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), and technical assistance (including its *Career and Technical Education Technical Assistance Center*, which SPN operates under contract for the New York State Department of Education (NYS CTE TAC). To learn more about SPN, visit <http://spnetwork.org/>
- Career Readiness Institute (CRI)** is an SPN-sponsored membership initiative that supports educator, community, and industry efforts in helping students to become career ready. CRI inspires and connects future-thinking educators and their stakeholders to recognize the urgent need to transform America’s existing K-12 learning systems in ways that will better enable young people to transition into adulthood – college-ready, life-ready, and career-ready – so they will become self-supporting, responsible citizens and lifelong learners in a rapidly changing and largely unpredictable future. Experience has provided us with the know-how to assist school communities to identify, share and implement changes in mindset and practices needed to prepare students to adapt to – and thrive in -an ambiguous future .Visit <http://cri.spnetwork.org/> Contact (518) 723-2063 or [Info@SPNet.us](mailto:Info@SPNet.us).

