What do school leaders need to know about culture?

Daniel Xerri
considers another aspect of leadership, in the final article in the series.

This article is the last in a ten-part series that examines some of the key concepts that leaders of private language schools might find useful to be familiar with.

Introduction

Developing a solid understanding of culture is important for school leaders working in private language schools given that it plays a central role in an organisation's success. Culture is not only something we associate with the country in which an organisation is based or the countries that impact its business, but it is a notion that manifests itself within the organisation itself and the people who constitute it.

Leadership and culture

The relationship between culture and leadership is quite significant given that the former can be as broad or as narrow a term as one chooses it to be. When culture is understood as consisting of national traditions and values, then we would need to consider how these affect leadership styles and the competences of leaders. For example, a study of half a million people in 42 countries found that those cultures that endorse charismatic and self-protective leadership values have increased entrepreneurship (Stephan & Pathak, 2016). A study investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership practices in Taiwan and the USA found that cultural differences play a role in the kind of competences and practices of the two sets of leaders (Hui-Wen *et al.*, 2010).

National and organisational cultures are rather different; while leaders can attempt to change a school's culture, they have no control over a country's culture despite being influenced by it (Hofstede, 2012). A number of studies show how leaders operating within different industries are influenced by national culture. For example, a company in Sweden was led by individuals who shared many values that are considered important in Swedish society; they also engaged in practices that prized

employee wellbeing given that this is deemed fundamental in that country's culture (Chatzidakis & Stenström, 2014). A study on the impact of Thai culture on leadership concludes that leadership styles are heavily influenced by a country's culture and practices, so much so that the dominant model of leadership found in many firms in Thailand is related to the country's culture (Vailati, 2014).

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Despite the fact that a school has its own organisational culture, it is most often the case that this is influenced by the broader societal culture (Dickson *et al.*, 2004). This is because a country's culture has a role in forming the characters and competences of its citizens and, by extension, the values that determine the choice of an organisation's leaders (Rosen *et al.*, 2000).

Creativity and intercultural competence

Cross-cultural differences can have a massive impact on a private language school's performance. This is quite evident in how creativity within organisations is affected by such differences. When creativity is understood as involving the phases of idea generation and idea evaluation, research indicates that there exist cross-cultural differences in the creative process whereby in certain cultures evaluation can be more stringent than in others (Ivancovsky *et al.*, 2019). The evaluation of creative ideas is affected by differences in cultural cognition (i.e. holistic versus analytic thinking), which influence the trade-off between an idea's novelty and usefulness (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018).

However, school leaders can play a decisive role in mitigating some of the effects of such cross-cultural differences. Given that certain cultures are bound to perceive a stronger trade-off than others, leaders can reduce the effects of cultural cognition by exposing employees to multiculturalism, enhancing cognitive diversity in a group and fostering a climate for innovation in an organisation (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018).

In social environments where status differentiation among people is expected and considered normal, there exists a high-power distance cultural context that affects creativity (Yuan & Zhou, 2015). In such contexts, working in groups can hinder creativity because people find it difficult to operate as actual teams given that high-status group members end up determining the group's ideas and solutions (Yuan & Zhou, 2015). In this kind of situation, a group leader needs to demonstrate humble behaviour and target low-status members, since these are the ones that are likely to hold back given the perceived group status differentiation (Yuan & Zhou, 2015).

In the case of new product or service development, leaders are advised to be culturally sensitive with respect to different conceptions of creativity (Elliot & Nakata, 2013). Given that a company's output is sometimes the result of input from a range of cultural contexts, an organisation should combine different conceptions of creativity and bank on the strengths of each one to mitigate respective weaknesses; in this way it can optimise the outcome of product and service development (Elliot & Nakata, 2013).

School leaders who are expected to work across different cultures require intercultural competence. Given the existence of etic cross-cultural leadership skills (trust, empathy, transformation, power and communication) (Grisham & Walker, 2008), leaders' cultural intelligence can be developed via training. For example, certain initiatives have been shown to enhance three factors of cultural intelligence, namely, metacognition, cognition and motivation (Wood & St. Peters, 2014). This suggests that such interventions can lead to positive attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. In addition, Henson (2016) suggests that leaders should first define the values or qualities that are core to their identity, and then they should reflect on how these values might be expressed in other cultures. Leaders need to be able to engage in global dexterity so as to find it easier to adopt styles or behaviours they might not be used to (Henson, 2016).

Organisational culture

Culture is also crucial when one thinks of leaders operating within a private language school. Organisational culture influences leadership but it is also true that a new leader can effect change in the culture of a school, especially if the implementation of new practices is meant to solve problems (Duncan, 2018). This is particularly so when a leader seeks to merge a company's values and those of its employees for the sake of enhanced performance and satisfaction.

The importance of the relationship between organisational and individual values is demonstrated by the fact that a person-organisation fit positively impacts job satisfaction and reduces employee turnover (Hudson *et al.*, 2017). Some values reflect a person-organisation fit (e.g., security, tradition and universalism) and are positively related to all aspects of organisational learning, whereas values that focus on the individual (e.g., power and self-direction) are negatively related to it (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). A school can develop value profiles of its employees in order to provide leaders with a better understanding of the potential of its human resources and increase human capital (Gashi, *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, organisational values play a role in shaping leaders' competences, so much so that the idea of leading through values has gained considerable traction (Gorenak & Ferjan, 2015).

> "The significance of creating an organisational culture that people feel at home in is demonstrated by what happens in certain startups."

The significance of creating an organisational culture that people feel at home in is demonstrated by what happens in certain startups. In *Zero to One* (2014), PayPal's cofounder Peter Thiel says that the perks typically associated with working for a Silicon Valley startup are absurd if a company lacks substance. Most often, that substance means having a group of people capable of generating new and valuable ideas and who work tirelessly to transform those ideas into business success. For him, 'a startup is a team of people on a mission, and a good culture is just what that looks like on the inside' (Thiel & Masters, 2014:119). He describes startups as being similar to cults, the only difference being that the 'people at a successful startup are fanatically *right* about something those outside it have missed' (Thiel & Masters, 2014:125). Their high level of commitment to whichever idea they deem to be right is what enables them not to slip into complacency; hence, creativity keeps flowing.

A review of some empirical studies reveals what successful startups do to sustain creative thinking as part of their organisational culture. In order to encourage employees to come up with creative and innovative ideas, some startups design working environments that include spaces for idea generation, a technology interface for collaboration and spaces for breaks and socialising (Lee, 2016). Creativity can also be fostered via the cultivation of critical thinking (Eggers *et al.*, 2017) and the formation of groups made up of people with diverse backgrounds (Karlusch *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, a leadership style

that is characterised by assertiveness, coaching and the capacity to engage in co-creation engenders creativity and shared values (Humala, 2015). Since open innovation – a team's openness to leverage external sources of knowledge to expand the internal resource base – is seen as contributing to a startup's success (Marullo *et al.*, 2018), it can be assumed that the development of creative thinking within an organisation's culture is also dependent on a leader harnessing outside sources of innovation.

Creating the right kind of organisational culture is very much dependent on a school leader's behaviour. One of the most important rules for cultural change within an organisation states that a leader has to act as a role model and entrench the desired culture in all that the organisation does (McLoughlin, 2018). Acting in a charismatic fashion is also significant, given that charismatic leadership is related to a leader's effectiveness and employees' openness to change (Groves, 2005). If change is desirable, it is up to a leader to find ways of persuading employees to see the present organisational culture as a human construction that requires reconceptualisation, rather than to continue perceiving it as the natural order of things. When a leader succeeds in creating such a shift in perception, rapid and radical cultural change is possible (Grint *et al.*, 2017).

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Conclusion

Given that culture affects an organisation's success, it is vital for school leaders in private language schools to understand how the concept cuts across national, organisational and individual dimensions. By developing intercultural competence and identifying the most appropriate ways of building an organisational culture that capitalises on people's sense of belonging, creativity and innovation, a leader can enable a school to thrive.

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Dr Daniel Xerri is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Malta. He chairs the ELT Council and holds an MBA from the University of Essex. www.danielxerri.com