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## **SCHOOL CULTURES: AN INTERESTING MODEL AND THEN SOME**

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Seldom am I able to undertake strategic planning, faculty compensation/evaluation, school climate and board governance assignments all in the same school and where these tasks fit seamlessly together. However, I was able to do that recently with a new client school and I came away with a renewed sense of the power of the mission to make a difference in the life of a school, offsetting my skepticism of so many schools whose mission statements sound very familiar. Many schools deliver on their mission statements fairly inconsistently.

What made for the powerful mission integrity of this one School?

First, it is a faith based school where the core philosophy runs deep. But even many faith based schools are weak in their mission consistency. So what else?

The President/Head is new in his position, willing to learn and is not arrogant. Constituents sense that he is observing carefully, listening intently and projects a tone that suggests openness to various points of view. However, he can also be firm when he needs to be.

But that does not account for it all.

The students are very unusual as a group. Their behavior and demeanor is poised, thoughtful, and reflective. Even while having fun, they have that fun in a polite and thoughtful manner. The students describe their own School as "nerdy and demanding", but they are proud of the fact that the teachers "expect us to excel, and we do." Indeed, the teaching corps is absolutely mission committed.

That is not to say there are not some quirky personalities within the faculty, or a few who distrust the administration or who are generally unhappy with some aspect of school life. But compared with the vast majority of schools, this faculty is mission focused and loyal. Even while wanting to earn more money, the teachers know that their school is paying them among the highest salaries and providing some of the most generous benefits for its type of school. So faculty culture, student culture and administrative culture are all consistently mission and faith based.



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But what else?

The approximately twenty-five Board members are committed. Normally, when I conduct a workshop on faculty compensation, benefits and evaluation, I ask that at least three board members show up on that day and be willing to be a part of an ongoing dialogue with the faculty and administration over a three to six month period. That requires a lot of sacrifice from busy board volunteers. I do not fault boards for struggling to find the three to five individuals needed for this process. But in this particular School, on relatively short notice, TEN board members showed up and agreed to participate in the work going forward and all of these folks are busy professionals, some of them major CEO types.

But is there something else?

The School is over one hundred years old. Admissions is highly competitive and selective. The students are economically, socially and racially diverse and commute on the average an hour or more in any direction. Many ride the train AND take a bus. One third of the students are on financial aid.

Something else?

The parents interviewed assigned a "9" out of a possible "10" to the value compared to the cost of the overall experience of their children at the School. This level of current and past parental satisfaction translates into financial support. The school does raise almost \$5 million a year in annual giving, mostly to support financial aid, and this for a day school.

Something else yet? Perhaps.

There are at least a few personalities who have been with the School almost 40 years whose loyalty, wisdom and generosity of spirit are obvious. In this school, I met one such person and this individual has a passion for the School that is palpable and has not waned during his long career there. However, he has the humility and service orientation reflected in the mission. He also has the power of persuasion for raising money and the ability to build networks of friends of the School that every school wants and needs. I felt it an honor to have met this man. He shakes your hand by holding yours in both of his. And it is not an empty gesture.

So the story is part mission consistency; part staff commitment and loyalty; part the hiring of good people over time; part the selection of the right mix of students over time; part is its history, location, reputation alumni loyalty, parental passion and pride: huge pride.

I would be honored to return to this School to undertake any assignment that would support its mission and goals. The strategic planning process that we did together will leave a lasting mark, I



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am sure, because all of the participants embraced it, committed to it and took the task of mapping out the School's future so seriously.

I left this School with a bounce, with a sense of pride, with a sense of energy not sadness, except for the sadness of leaving a friend. I felt the goodness of the human condition, the kindness of most of the folks there, the basic niceness of the students. And I felt the mission. We could all learn from this model.

### **THE POWER OF YOUR MISSION STATEMENT AND USING IT TO YOUR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

While we cannot all claim a 100 plus year history like the School in the above example, we can spend time and energy on more than just wordsmithing, and periodically undertaking a review of the mission statement. This exercise tends to coincide with the accreditation process in most schools rather than being a planned, thoughtful and important activity.

I have become a great proponent of dissecting that mission statement that is often on the wall of the board room (and other rooms) and is so long that no one reads it or remembers it. These mission statements are often platitudes, not concretely grounded in the school's history or practice, nor even felt emotionally or powerfully enough for constituents to be able to recite the same key words from the mission.

I am a big believer in "tag Lines", ones that truly capture what is true about a school; what provokes an emotional response and what differentiates it from the competition. Recently, I worked for a school in a gorgeous, panoramic mountain site in Europe. The School does an incredible job in its outdoor education, academic preparation, university placement, character development and in helping the students to build a lifelong network of friends who help each other open doors to career opportunities.

Yet, on the home page of this School's website is a picture of a gym and an outdoor basketball court covered with snow. Where are the mountain views? Where are the pictures of and messages about the students mountaineering, skiing and demonstrating those unique qualities of character that the school espouses to develop and for which it has a proven track record? They are there, buried deep in the website, but not easily found.

A few years ago, this School had a successful capital campaign. The campaign theme was: "Reaching New Heights." During the strategic planning process this struck me as the beginnings of a tag line that the School needs to display prominently on its home page. In the background, there should be pictures of students climbing those peaks and on those field trips that require strength of character and leadership skills. They should put those key themes of greatness UNDER that tag line. They



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certainly have the photos, the location, the history and the proof. "Reaching New Heights: In Academics, Character Development, Mountaineering and Leadership, and Developing Life Long Friendships." There it is.

Recently at another client School, I was engaged in assisting the school in marketing. This is the most established School in this mid size city. The tag line is concise but does not capture powerfully the essence of the School. The School was formerly the only show of its kind in town but now there are good attractive options such as public magnet schools, charter schools, Christian schools and another younger independent school, all competing for the same students.

This client is committed to diversity and is known for a non sectarian program in a town with a strong evangelical population. The initial tone picked up in interviewing almost 100 parents was on the surface somewhat critical, but not about major issues. One might say (as an administrator did) that there is a "malaise" in the parent body which made parents less likely to speak about the school positively in the broader community. Perhaps because it is the most expensive school in town, they are reluctant to talk much about the school to friends, colleagues, neighbors and fellow church or synagogue attendees. And yet?

There was a consistent message coming through to this Consultant and a rare one. Math is the strongest area of the curriculum. The arts and sciences are a close second with English and writing following not far behind. Children are very happy overall, and the most consistent theme of all is that parents find that the School's teachers are able to tailor a rigorous academic program to individual children. Parents articulated this distinguishing characteristic of the School with passion, emotion and loyalty SO there was an opportunity to be seized!

Passion DOES exist among that parent body. It is just latent. Parents are not the advocates whom they should be either on campus or in the broader community, and yet few ever leave the School. Why would they? How many schools do you know where teachers teach to the learning style of the students rather than expecting the student to adjust to the teaching style of the teacher? How many schools do you know where not one of the curriculum areas was criticized seriously and most were praised, AND where college counseling and university placement are given an average grade of 10 out of 10. Worldwide the most commonly criticized areas of schools by parents are poor college counseling/placement and weak math and science.

Given all these positives, the challenge was to recruit parents who could begin to build on this consistent message of positive things that parents consistently mentioned, ONCE they got a few of the smaller issues off their minds.

The tag line still needs to be replaced with one that reflects the academic excellence and



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customized, student-centered learning happening at this school. But now some 70 parents are being mobilized as parent admissions amb

assadors to tell the "good news" more coherently, more passionately and with a mission based focus. At another recent school where our Firm worked to help recruit almost 90 parent admissions ambassadors, one parent wrote, in part:

"Harnessing the brain power, enthusiasm, and experience of the School's parents to sell a product we all believe in is a simple idea. And brilliant. With your insightful questions and rapid analysis you have quantified and confirmed what we know in our hearts. It is reassuring to learn that the qualities that brought us to this School when we were searching for a kindergarten program for our child have held up rather nicely a dozen years later... Until your arrival on campus, I was content to think of the School as one of the best kept secrets in education. But I'm persuaded by your presentation. It is important for the future of the school that we do a better job telling our story... I am by nature skeptical of hype, hoopla and public relations. So it is, to say the least, uncharacteristic of me to leave the training session proudly wearing my School Ambassador pin...And I don't think the School should hire a publicist. I'm sure there are parents and administrators who would be more effective. If I can be helpful, great."

When you have these kinds of parents; when you have a powerful mission that is active, living and breathing in a school culture; when you have a dynamic student body, or a passionate group of teachers and administrators, then you have a gift and a story worth telling.

John Littleford  
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