

by Pat Jackson

# Practical PR

Schools deal in two kinds of cultures . . . but we rarely talk about one of them. Our emphasis is on the *societal culture* we're passing along to the next generation. Therefore, we focus on subject matter. On teaching. On the classroom. Yet the other culture is the key to carrying out this education mission. It is *corporate culture*—what we do and share together as a group.

Every organization develops a culture. People working or living in the same place create certain ways of doing things and of thinking which become indigenous to them and to the place.

Much of corporate culture grows unconsciously; other portions are planned. Regardless, this culture often goes unnoticed despite its affect on—and even control over—the school family. Most of us just haven't spent a lot of time thinking about our corporate culture, *per se*. We do think about its results, in terms like teamwork, morale, productivity. The school's publics think of it in terms like inviting, friendly, happy—or forbidding, hassling, unhelpful.

Whether we like it or not, the conglomerate actions of each school's body corporate send a message about the place and the people. Sometimes this message, like body language, contradicts the verbal messages we're trying to communicate. While spokespersons, newsletters, and annual reports are saying what a lovely place Jones Elementary is, the palpable corporate culture there may say something else. That relationships among staff are political and uncooperative, for example, generating an inward-looking attitude that results in impatience with parents who ask questions. Or maybe tight budgets have driven people apart, so overt criticism of

colleagues is heard.

I use these negative illustrations to point out the damage that lack of awareness about corporate culture can do.

Blessedly, it is easier to have a positive culture—because that's more fun, more apt to draw support and energy, and more natural to educators, who by nature have to be optimists, believers, uplifters. Positive corporate culture invites good things to happen. It sets the environment for acceptance of new methods, for willingness to try new ideas for morale and teamwork, for effective teaching and learning, for caring relations with students and one another, for risk-taking and learning from our inevitable mistakes, for cooperation between schools and central administration.

Some suggestions to help build such a culture in your school:

- **Step 1 is awareness.** Get everyone thinking about the concept of corporate culture. Discuss and agree on what yours is . . . and what you'd like it to be. Sounds obvious—but this groupwork is powerful.

- **Step 2 involves STS philosophy.** STS stands for Socio-Technical System—recognizing that every workplace (schools are no exception) has a natural, unavoidable social side as well as its task or technical side. Accepting this practical view lets administrators work *with* human nature, instead of fighting it.

You know the old joke about “what a great place this school would be if only it weren't for the people.” STS is basic to a good corporate culture because administration by definition is “getting things done with people.”

- **Step 3 is OCV.** Speaking with One Clear Voice to all your publics,

internal and external. Fully thought through this requires that actions and attitudes (your “culture”) complement written and spoken communications. Therefore . . .

- **Participation and sharing are step 4.** If all stakeholders in the corporate body have some voice in decisions and information is fully shared with them, they feel ownership in the culture. They become, by definition, a team . . . a group committed to similar goals.

These ideas are supported by three principles of behavioral science: (1) From psychology, the fact that people will only get behind those policies and organizations they have a voice in shaping; (2) From sociology, that bad relationships between two groups are the result of an abuse, real or perceived, on the part of one; (3) From anthropology, that no successful society or organization exists without some cheerleading.

When you first enter a school, you can feel what it must be like to be a teacher or an administrator there. This is corporate culture manifesting itself. If I visit your school, what will it say to me? □



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This column is reprinted from the March, 1984, issue of *The School Administrator*, published by the American Association of School Administrators.