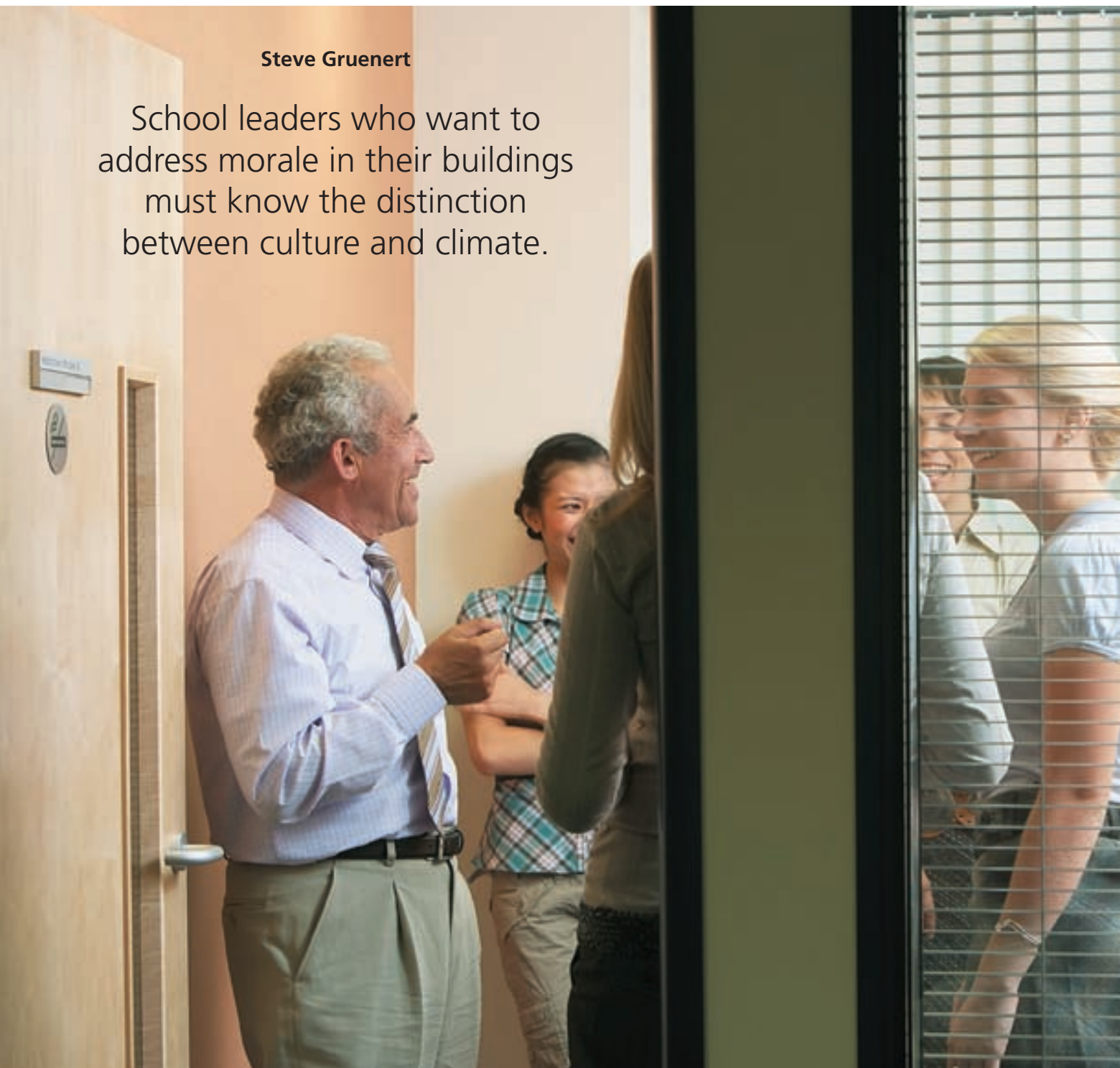


School Culture, They Are Not the Same Thing

Steve Gruenert

School leaders who want to address morale in their buildings must know the distinction between culture and climate.



School Climate:

IN BRIEF

This article links staff performance to feelings of overall happiness, arguing that school culture, or a common set of expectations, can only be altered by addressing the climate.



Many school leaders believe that organizational culture and organizational climate are the same thing. The distinction that I will describe is not an exercise in semantics. Although these two terms have similar characteristics, they express two separate concepts. Once educators understand the difference, they will develop the capacity to be more precise in their diagnoses and treatments of the two.

What Is School Climate?

School climate is a term that has been used for many decades. Its early use denoted the ethos, or spirit, of an organization. More recently, school climate is thought to represent the attitude of an organization. The collective mood, or morale, of a group of people has become a topic of concern, especially in our new age of accountability. It seems that a happy teacher is considered a better teacher, and this attitude influences the quality of instruction.

If happy people truly perform better, then leaders must create conditions in which happiness thrives. Unfortunately, some leaders do not research the most effective strategies for creating a happy school climate, instead relying on extrinsic rewards. Bringing doughnuts to the faculty lounge on Fridays may help a few teachers wake up quicker, but this act will not affect the morale of the building.

Activities designed to address low morale by creating a more positive climate need to be scrutinized using the following criteria:

- How much of an investment of time, money, and energy is involved?
- How much time will elapse before the activity begins to make a difference?
- Is the activity designed to impact an individual or a group?

- Is the activity built around intrinsic or extrinsic rewards?
- What will the culture say about it?

The last criterion is significant because an organization's culture determines its climate.

Culture Always Wins

Whenever a group of people spend a significant amount of time together, they develop a common set of expectations. These expectations evolve into unwritten rules to which group members conform in order to remain in good standing with their colleagues. Groups develop a common culture in order to pass on information to the next generation. That information, however, represents a set of beliefs that have been passed down by imperfect humans with personal preferences.

In schools, new teachers arrive with their own ideas about how to do their jobs. Through their schooling, they will have been immersed in theories of best practices and cutting-edge methodologies. If the culture of their first job does not embrace these new ideas, they will soon learn that to fit in they will need to assimilate. Because new teachers want to fit in and to feel like experienced teachers, they are vulnerable to the school's culture and all the unwritten rules that have been passed on through the decades.

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).

Comparing Climate with Culture

The relationship between culture and climate can be observed through our perceptions of the days of the week. Typically in U.S. schools, Mondays are perceived as miserable and Fridays are thought of as fun. This viewpoint reflects the business model's values and, thus, we learn that we are not supposed to want to come to school on Mondays. Teachers and students often talk about the weekend or the next holiday or vacation, often counting down the days. To come in on Monday morning, happy about being there and *not* looking forward to the weekend would challenge the existing climate. As a result, we can expect the climate to be less positive on Mon-

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days than it is on Fridays.

Placing a higher value on weekends is a particularly American phenomenon. There are many societies, or cultures, that do not place value on the day of the week. Cultures create the negative stigma of Monday mornings and we teach this preference to each generation—it usually takes hold around the fourth or fifth grade for students. When the climate is negative, as is the case on most Monday mornings, it is the culture that dictates how members of the group are supposed to feel. The culture tells us that we're supposed to feel miserable on Mondays.

Table 1 provides some examples of the

differences between climate and culture and how culture influences climate.

Shaping Culture Through Climate

Climate is the main leverage point for any culture, which means that if school leaders want to shape a new culture, they should start with an assessment of the climate. If the culture is ineffective, there are probably climate issues that were missed before they became rooted in the culture. In the doughnut example, if the principal brings doughnuts to the teachers' lounge on Friday, the climate might change that day. If the principal brings doughnuts every Friday for a year, that behavior will become part of the culture, an unwritten expectation. The first Friday the principal doesn't bring doughnuts, however, the climate might change that day. You can replace doughnuts with a smile, formal attire, tardiness, a walk around the building, or practically anything.

The two concepts are also related in that they are both conceptual. Everything around you, including what you see, hear, feel, and smell, are all artifacts of the culture. Reaction to each of these senses is influenced by the culture because culture taps into belief systems and helps to decide preferences, dislikes, who to trust, when to go home, what to wear, how fast to drive, and how to teach. The culture will provide you with information about customs and how you should react to certain situations. How we behave in the light of student misfortunes is determined by the culture; conversely, how we reward student success must also fit within the social architecture of the group.

A holistic view of the statements in Table 1 reveals that changing the climate can be accomplished without much effort, suggesting that it is somewhat out of our control. For example, events may transpire that will affect the attitude of

TABLE 1

Contrasting Climate with Culture

| CLIMATE | CULTURE |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Monday versus Friday | → Gives Mondays permission to be miserable |
| Attitude or mood of the group | → Personality of the group |
| Provides a state of mind | → Provides a (limited) way of thinking |
| Flexible, easy to change | → Takes many years to evolve |
| Based on perceptions | → Based on values and beliefs |
| Feel it when you come in the door | → Members cannot feel it |
| Is all around us | → Is part of us |
| The way we feel around here | → The way we do things around here |
| First step to improvement | → Determines if improvement is possible |
| It's in your head | → It's in your head |

teachers before they get to school. If happy teachers are better teachers, should we be concerned about what they are happy about? Or for that matter, what might make them sad? Would a teacher who won \$10,000 from a lottery ticket on his or her way to work do a better job of teaching that day? Would a teacher who slipped on ice outside his or her home do a worse job of teaching that day? The answer lies in what the culture expects them to do. Perhaps all that school leaders can do is attempt to create optimal conditions for staff and remain vigilant over those aspects that may sabotage their efforts.

Understanding the differences and similarities between culture and climate gives us a more precise instrument by which we might improve our schools. To implement a strategy designed to change our mood, or climate, is certainly not the same as one that targets our

WEB RESOURCES

Articles from the fall 2007 issue of NAESP's *Leadership Compass*, which focused on school climate, can be accessed on the NAESP Web site.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=2386


Renee White-Clark explores the role of teachers' attitudes in closing the achievement gap among minority students in her article, "Training Teachers to Succeed in a Multicultural Climate." The article, from the March/April 2005 issue of *Principal*, is available on the NAESP Web site.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1511

Donna Marriott's article, "Managing School Culture," from the September/October 2001 issue of *Principal*, is available on the NAESP Web site.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=707

"Understanding the differences and similarities between culture and climate gives us a more precise instrument by which we might improve our schools."

belief systems, or culture. Real school improvement has been boiled down by many authors as simply changing the way teachers teach. This will not be accomplished by bringing doughnuts to school. 

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