



A LEADER'S JOURNEY

SEEDING CULTURE IN AN ORGANISATION

- Kiran Sethi, Deepa Avashia & Namrata Jajoo



In other places that I worked, people would know me just as a school bus driver and sometimes not even know my name. But in my 10 years at Riverside, teachers and students know me and address me by name and make me feel that the work I do is of great value!"

Hemant Shah, Transport Team Member, The Riverside School.

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We hear a lot about culture in the corporate world. Lately, it has also become a topic of discussion in the education arena. In my visits to educational institutions across the world, I see a growing aspiration to establish a culture that is positive and nurturing.

But how does one go about cultivating it? Well, I believe it starts with the leadership, and it is more about what they do rather than what they say.

When I was setting up Riverside in 2001, we looked at culture as an essential piece. In hindsight, the fact that we grew slowly was a blessing. Since we began with five teachers and 25 students, we had the luxury of time and numbers to co-create our systems and processes.

With the inflow of more teachers and students, we grew year on year, and today, we have 85 teachers, 35 support team members, and 407 children on campus! In all these years, we have moved from vision to action by constant co-creation.

Setting the culture in motion is, of course, an ongoing effort and not without some slips and misses.

Through this article, I share how leaders can be catalysts in cultivating and enriching the culture of any organisation. Not that we are culture Gurus, but the endeavour is to put forth from our wonderful journey of 19 years, ideas that have worked for us instinctively, and through practice.



1.

Culture is a shared set of value systems and behaviours.

These are upheld by the stakeholders of an ecosystem every day. Since it is intangible, it becomes very difficult to identify and change, but it is like the smell of the place that you will always pick up!

More often than not, in schools, the focus is on pedagogy and curriculum. What many leaders miss is the opportunity to build cultures by recognising that people build the culture, and not a single practice.

As a team, we realised early that our ecosystem was built on several touchpoints with our various stakeholders like students, parents, teachers, support teams, and the community at large. While it may seem like an abstract idea, it can be intentionally planted and sowed. The intentionality comes in the design of processes, keeping in mind the People, Purpose and Practices which allow that value system to be inculcated.

Add to this, the fourth P of Professionalism, and you will have the perfect DNA strand to build a robust culture.



2.

While building **Culture**, don't miss the **WHO** and the **WHY**

If leaders spent more time in determining the WHO and the WHY, the WHAT and the HOW would never be a concern.

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Likewise, skills, mindsets, and competencies also differ from person to person. So, cultures are built with more alignment when the teams can see the leaders live the values rather than merely read about them in a vision and mission statement.



3.

Work around **Belief systems** and **mindsets**

As a leader, my primary work is around belief systems and mindsets. Giving the team the opportunity to dream big, explore possibilities, and turn them into reality has been my biggest role. My practice served as an example as I taught full-time every day for the first seven years.



4.

Be **receptive** to messages

There will be occasions when you might feel fatigued and fumble about what to do. At such times, look for sources that can give you hope because leadership is where hope resides. So, it doesn't matter where the message comes from; it's important that you are receptive. This means that leaders have to be more optimistic than others because everybody else looks up to you, and you have to believe that your dreams are possible and convey this to the team.

Be authentic because your teams will know when you are not.



5.

Bring **self-worth** to your people

This reassures each person that they are valuable and have their space in the organisation. It comes from intentionality in a leader—where you are intentional about taking out time for each person—through congenial meetings, collegial support, and mentoring. When people walk into the school ecosystem and see fewer cribs, complaints and pettiness, they see that this is the way to go.



6.

Lead from your strengths and not weakness

When you lead from your weaknesses, ego, defensiveness, and frustration come into play. But when you are self-aware and recognise your limitations, you will bring in people who are competent to do the job. Leaders must appreciate the value of leading from competency rather than positional authority.



7.

Invest time and build the organisation block by block

The leader has to be the first to take ownership. My investment in the first five years was immersive and intense. I would take the lead in training, learning, and teaching, and be the 'go-to person' 24x7. Our culture naturally evolved as one of collaboration and completion rather than competition. Together, we test new practices, seed them into the system, and evaluate which work best to be rolled out into the following year.



8.

Timetable for Professional Development

The first two years were also organic, where I would read to my team and share whatever I was gathering about practices in other ecosystems, and attending workshops. Initially, a lot of what we did came from sheer practice, and after the first two years, we followed a time-table of professional development with structured in-service training.



9.

Make your practice *iterative and reflective*

For the first seven years, we were growing at a pace that allowed us to reflect deeply. The school leaders, along with teachers, students, and support team, regularly reviewed the processes to evaluate what was going into the lesson plan and how it was being translated into the classroom. Today, because of a structure to the practice, that intentionality is visible and easily replicable.



10.

Keep up your stamina and patience

Recognise that each person in the team has a different pace and rhythm. It is the responsibility of the leaders to have stamina and patience to encourage growth and excellence, individually and collectively.



11.

Autonomy, Accountability, and Audacity - the 3 A's of Culture

Knowing your team helps you determine how much autonomy can be given to them, a practice that builds accountability and brings audacity to their practice. Since it takes time to grow into a leadership role, be mindful in nurturing your second and third tiers of leadership.



How to preserve your organisation's culture amidst challenges

Culture blends with a leader's ability to foresee challenges, attrition being a crucial one. At present, about 60 percent of our team has been with us for more than seven years, acting as custodians of the culture and helping propagate it. Another vital challenge is Professional Development, as it can easily be missed or overridden by other priorities. So, always prioritise it.

In all that you do, see that your practice always comes from moral authority; otherwise, it can become superfluous and not have the desired impact on your stakeholders.

Remember that emotional and social issues will always crop up, so it is best to institute an upward redressal system from the beginning. This makes people feel heard, where they do not struggle to voice their concerns or problems. When you trust your team, you know that you are not alone.

Lastly, be the best storyteller for your organisation, because nothing is more inspiring and encouraging for the team than a nostalgic recapitulation of their incredible journey!

(Written by Kiran Bir Sethi and Deepa Avashia. Edited by Shruti Singhal)

Images Courtesy: The Riverside School/Facebook

About the author: Kiran Bir Sethi is an Indian educationist, designer and thinker. She founded the Riverside School in 2001 and since then has infected millions of students and educators with the 'I CAN Mindset' through her design thinking framework of 'Feel-Imagine-Do-Share' (FIDS).

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