

A Perceptual Look

At

School Culture

And Values

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## Introduction

This study analyzed how teaching staff understand perspectives about values in a school culture. Culture is developed over time, and for even the newest members to the teaching staff, is prevalent. Specific elements of a school community linked to culture such as, socio-economic status, family structure, student programming, and achievement were all considered for data collection during focus group and interview questions. I considered the following question as the basis of the research:

1. How are values in the culture of a school community developed and identified?

## Definition of Terms

**Focus Group-** Robert Bogdan and Sari Bilken (2007) define focus groups for qualitative researchers as group interviews that are structured to foster talk among the participants about particular issues. People are brought together and encouraged to talk about the subject of interest (Morgan, 1997).

**Human Resource Frame-** Bolman and Deal describe this perspective on organization and leadership in a traditional frame. It focuses on attention on human needs and assumes that organizations that meet basic needs will work better than those that do not. Human resource leaders value relationships and feelings, and seek to lead through facilitation and empowerment. They tend to define problems in individual or interpersonal terms and look for ways to adjust the organization to fit people- or to adjust the people to fit the organization, for example, through training and workshops.

**Organizational Culture-** Edgar Schein (1992) defines culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

**Setting/Context-** Robert Bogdan and Sari Bilken (2007) define setting/context as the most general information on the setting, topic, or subjects to be sorted.

### Setting/Context

The research was done on five staff members from Farmingdale High School in Farmingdale, New York. There were four teachers and one dean who previously taught in the high school, all with a range of experience from 2-18 years in education. Each one had also participated in some other role either as club advisor, athletic coach, or academic tutor.

### Research Method

The research was done using qualitative data analysis. The data was collected during focus group and individual interview sessions during the course of four schools day from May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 through May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Responses were organized relative to each question and the respondents (see Appendices A and B). The data were then analyzed for themes, patterns, and discrepancies (Taylor-Dunlop, 2011).

## Findings

In the interviews several themes emerged in the responses analyzed. Respondents frequently referred to their school as a “mini university,” equating the school to a higher education institution with so much to offer. They described the school as having “something for everyone.” These excerpts indicate a conformed perception of the school similar to a thriving university with topics and interests for any student population. In addition, the description of the town being a “blue collar town” was frequently used to describe the community at large (see Appendix B). Staff members draw a symbolic connection between the school as a conduit to achievement, and perhaps an instrument for upward social mobility.

Additionally, several respondents described themselves with the label of life coach. The staff in this study believes they have a responsibility to be, “role models, coaches, mentors, and counselors” to fully support their students’ needs. Teachers felt their classroom was a “safe haven” for their students. To summarize, a prevalent theme for this group of staff members is that their responsibilities go beyond merely teaching the basics of their content area.

Patterns that emerged from the data were more numerous than any of the three areas for analysis. In describing the school community the most commonly used descriptors were, “tradition,” “pride,” “competitive nature,” “supportive of extra-curricular programs,” and “broad range of both athletic and music programs.” The teachers frequently stated that there was overwhelming “civic pride” in Farmingdale and this pride is echoed in all the schools of the district. Schein would say that the organizational culture of the school district believes or assumes that the pride of the district is shared and valid to a degree that it should be taught to new teachers. The second year teacher of the group specifically stated, “There is a strong sense of ‘Daler Pride’ and you’re

expected to excel regardless of what you're involved in. There is a strong sense of community and seems to be the central thought of the town (see Appendix B).”

Only a few discrepancies could be noted from the data. One teacher could not explain how district goals were implemented. Another teacher reported about the need for cleanliness in classrooms, while another reported bathroom cleanliness needs as areas for improvement. The group also had outliers in the area of community expectations for the school in general with regard to overall student achievement.

Of the three areas analyzed, themes, patterns, or discrepancies, patterns were more prevalent than the others. This would suggest that a culture with values in the areas of broad student programming options, athletic competition, and hard working families. The pattern of shared basic assumptions about the school community and the internal integration of staff both would be proof of what Edgar Schein calls an organizational culture (Schein, 1992).

## References

- Bogdan, R. & Bilken, S. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (1990). *Images of Leadership*. Boston, MA: Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association.
- Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: 2nd Ed., Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor-Dunlop, K. Lecture notes (Spring 2011)

## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions:

1. In what ways does your role in the school support the values in the school community?
2. What is your assessment of community values for Farmingdale?
3. In your time spent in the Farmingdale school community describe your typical interactions and engagement with others, based on your role.
4. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the Farmingdale school community that I did not ask you already?

### Interview Questions:

1. How are district-wide goals developed for Farmingdale Public Schools?
2. How are school-wide or building goals developed for the high school?
3. In what ways are you involved in addressing the needs of the school community?
4. What are some of the most prevalent values of this school community?
5. What is it that the community at-large would most like to see accomplished by the district?
6. Can you tell me the academic expectations for the students in this school?
7. What if any, would be important school building facility projects or improvements?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked or that you think is important to mention?

## Appendix B

Focus Group Question 1: <b>In what ways does your role in the school support the values in the school community?</b>	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	“From a personal perspective the work ethic and commitment demonstrated by the instructor shows how to work hard. It also provides another example of how responsibility has an impact on what an adult should be- professionalism.”
B	“Uniqueness of the job provides clear expectations to students. Professional consistency and commitment. Expectations are reciprocal and students understand this relationship. Peer to peer or colleague to colleague both provide support but is not necessarily a need.”
C	“Academic expectations are already there. <b>Classroom is the safe haven</b> and should be welcoming. Classroom should be the focus. Student rapport must be professional- Good professional relationships. Instructors take their work seriously.”
D	“ <b>Teacher role as coach-</b> Community respects high school graduates. Home life may be difficult and aspirations varied- “Blue collar” point-of-view and sense- Classroom focus must be welcoming and consistent- Play strengths and weaknesses- Respect from parents in a phone call depending- The students seek jobs that reflect a <b>blue collar</b> town i.e. landscaping; parent business- Students value a trade school education”
E	“Teacher role as <b>a life coach-</b> Responsibility to stress life beyond high school- Foster self sufficiency; self advocacy; independence- Talents and interests are varied- Diverse program and ‘something for everyone’- Opportunities for every student and supports all interests”
Focus Group Question 2: <b>What is your assessment of community values for Farmingdale?</b>	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	“Community values are strong due to returning staff and longevity in the community- Attracted to sports, music, or extracurricular- Academics are more important to some than others- School tradition and reputation for the extracurricular programs- They have a goal in mind and are happy to get there.”
B	“Youth athletic programs(start as early as 3)- Parental “trickle down” for the athletic type of support- Similar in classroom setting- Parental values reflect early decision to commit to certain choices- Programs are diverse- Diversity happens on its own...not a particular value held by the community (still an us and them sentiment)”
C	“The community values the appearance and building facilities- The high school is the hub of the community- Diversity is still lacking in the community(True integration not



	a value)- Tradition is valued- Youth Council programs are heavily valued- Community has become more transient.”
D	“Community/School Pride and Tradition are heavily valued (ex. Mass/Farm conflict)- Events attract all members of the community- The high school represents a “mini university”- Emphasis of a traditional climate- Facilities encourage that kind of pride which leads to athletics.”
E	“Competition and “winning” are heavily valued- ‘Daler Pride’ and excel regardless of what you’re involved in, i.e. Athletics; Science Bowl; Carpentry; All events and interests are promoted in community news which demonstrates the level of civic pride in town- Strong sense of community/central thought of the town- Fundraisers.”

Focus Group Question 3: **In your time spent in the Farmingdale school community describe your typical interactions and engagement with others, based on your role.**

Respondent	Response(s)
A	“Several Roles i.e.- Teacher- Advisor to Clubs(Honor Society)- Fundraising(Interact Club)- Head Building Rep.(Union)- All helped provide opportunities for different support- Opportunities to get to know students better- Easier to form relationships.”
B	“Students mostly want to “do the right thing”- Students respond accordingly- Material things sense of entitlement are both absent- Role as Dean/Coach allows for involvement in everything.”
C	“Typical interactions are in my role as mentor; tutor; advisor; counselor; teacher; liaison with discipline; co-advisor; role as social worker.”
D	“Role as life coach in what students are doing- what’s important in their lives- Students do/will communicate- Students demonstrate social tolerance(esp. towards special needs students) Role as coach allows interactions that humble students and help them experience humility.”
E	“Role continues to evolve- Support system to parents and school- Assistance with supervising students or strategies to work with kids- View teachers as role models- Support all students and develop a caring relationship- Parent phone calls and communication with parents- Attendance at extra-curricular events- Reputation of involvement”

Focus Group Question 4: **Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the Farmingdale community that I did not ask?**

Respondent	Response(s)
A	No response.
B	No response.
C	No response.

D	No response.
E	No response.

## Appendix B

Interview Question 1: <b>How are district-wide goals developed for Farmingdale Public Schools?</b>	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	“Goals are developed by the district office or “the top down.” Also from heads of department areas to develop a general set of goals. A committee is used to construct goals. The committee includes a union representative; central administrator; building administrator; teaching staff. However this was not the case for the last set of goals...teachers did not have much say.”
B	“Goals are not a directive from the top-down. Seems lately there has been more teacher involvement. A Small group is used to develop building goals, but teacher goals are more directed from the top-down.”
C	“Goals are developed from administration and the Farmingdale Board of Education working together. The Farmingdale Board of Education represents the town or community vote, so it is representative that way.”
D	“Goals seem driven toward community interests in athletics and how they were formed. Concerns such as state test scores may be a result in the gap in the area of developing district goals. The goals help to maintain that there is a diverse offering of programs i.e. sports; extra-curricular activities; foods programs; child development; music and all of the programs must be “top-notch.”
E	“Goals were not developed with any teacher input...they were not specifically asked. The goals were put out by the board of education. They were presented as “Here it is, now do it.” The mission statements developed independently by departments were more narrowly focused because it was a distinct group.”
Interview Question 2: <b>How are school-wide goals developed in the high school?</b>	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	“I would imagine that the principal and assistant principal have a key role. They must collaborate with department directors. Union representatives and teacher’s aspect for input as with all committees to maintain diverse representation (possibly even a student member).”
B	“Building goals are developed at department and faculty meetings. Topics offered for professional development and in-service courses are linked to building goals. Small committee or group is used to develop building goals and approached in a way to also address tone/climate. The overall goal is to increase academic achievement. For the first time it was the primary focus of the school district. Never has academics been the

	priority as much as this now because it has been stated from the top-down.”
C	“Building goals are constructed when a committee is formed and participants or volunteers are asked. A cite-based team which includes parent teacher association involvement is probably employed. Academic goals are much more departmental as well as the financial needs of the district. Desired goals could be impeded by a lack of funds. The building administration gives teachers and staff a lot of input and information. Input from those doing the work doesn’t always occur because of the development of the goals themselves.”
D	“The process of how building goals are developed is ‘tough to tell.’ What I’ve heard and understand is that goals were based on cleaning up the high school and establishing general order. The building has the same district goals as everyone else. It’s driven by the exercise to develop a mission statement and create uniformity.”
E	“I have not been part of developing school-wide goals, ever. The goal would be to graduate students and do well on statewide assessments. They are not goals to produce Ivy League scholars, or not designed for social/emotional development. The goal would be for students to understand and function in the real world with real world situations and develop outside applications for what is learned.”
<b>Interview Question 3: In what ways are you involved in addressing the needs of the school community?</b>	
<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Response(s)</b>
A	“I participate in New York State Regents exam review, and preparation for state assessment support resources. In addition, I volunteer time to meet with students for any reason without considering compensation.”
B	“I support student daily attendance in class. Encourage and support a positive climate with an academic focus in student conferences. Impress on students a sense of empathy toward academic goals, or relay this information through discipline.”
C	“As a humanities teacher I drive home the concept of being a humanitarian. On the grand scale you do what you can to support every avenue of success or achievement for students. For me, participation in scholarship committee, advisor for the yearbook for 18 years. Support is also demonstrated through a shared understanding when students miss classes for things like music rotations. However, it does impede the goal sharing initiative when colleagues don’t stress the student responsibility when missing class for this reason, or colleagues don’t consider which class is consistently missed.”
D	“As a teacher I foster communication goals every day. Teachers are role models who should teach goals, values, and morals. It’s best for the students to have a variety of programs and a positive safe environment which starts in our classrooms. The goals and values of the community should be stressed in class and discussed in a way that demonstrates your interest in those same things.”

E	“I try to address student needs by making myself available... Visibility in the community. I also am approachable and have an “open-door” policy but still being honest and real about situations that arise.”
<b>Interview Question 4: What are some of the most prevalent values of this school community?</b>	
<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Response(s)</b>
A	“The values of the community are rooted in maintaining sports, music, and extracurricular programs. These values are evident in that they encompass the largest portion of student involvement... The tradeoff is created by the roadblock created when students are consistently pulled out for music rotations, etc. but since the music program plays a high role in the community then others take a back seat.”
B	“High academic achievement historically was not valued, but that is returning. Graduation alone is not good enough. There is tremendous pride in extracurricular programs. Value is placed in the appearance and development of the facilities. There is a strong sense of school pride and spirit. Music and extra-curricular programs are also highly valued. Academic achievement is not the most highly valued aspect of the school community.”
C	“Our school community has a reputation for strong academic, athletic, and extracurricular programs. Participation in athletics starts early and the community supports a broad, diverse selection of programs provided. Family is generational in Farmingdale. Pride of ownership and taking care of property owned are prevalent in the community as well.”
D	“There are several things that are prevalent and valued in the community. First, the tradition of Farmingdale pride and “being a Daler.” Next achieving at a high level in things that emphasize the culture and pride in the district. Third are the sports programs... followed by the music programs. Fifth are extra-curricular clubs related to academics. Academic coursework is next, and then being a good citizen and person.”
E	“Prevalent values are the nature of competing and winning (coming out on top in all events). There is a chip on students’ shoulders to do better than others. Athletics is valued as much, or more than academics. It is seen as a ticket used to get ahead. The community has tremendous civic pride in the accomplishments of its athletic teams. An example can be seen in the annual Little League parade the town holds.”
<b>Interview Question 5: What is it that the community at-large would most like to see accomplished by the district?</b>	
<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Response(s)</b>
A	“Students graduating with a Regents diploma and a well-rounded education are expected to be accomplished. Students have diverse programming and options outside of core curriculum. Students can consistently have a full schedule for all four years, and

	mandated courses for 11/12 grade student schedules.”
B	“Successful completion of high school. There is not an overwhelming demand to achieve academic success, but more based on what the district has to offer. The community is happy with the broad offering of elective courses such as, foods; child development; technology; carpentry; and automotive class more than advanced placement courses.”
C	“The community likely wants the schools to accomplish mastery on standardized tests, or 100% passing rate. They probably expect the school to offer enrichment and remediation programs; meeting the needs of all learners; college or advanced placement courses. Student to teacher ratios is also important.”
D	“The high school diploma to be valuable is one thing the community would want the district to produce. Students to be competitive in the college application process. Provide opportunities for extra-curricular participation. Support the ability for students to further themselves in the community.”
E	“The community just wants the district to put out an acceptable budget with everything included.”

**Interview Question 6: Can you tell me the academic expectations for students in this school?**

Respondent	Response(s)
A	“Students need to pass the Regents exams, and getting as many to pass as possible are part of the expectations. You also want them to achieve mastery or an 85 or better. Increase the numbers of students graduating with an Advanced Regents diploma.”
B	“One expectation is for the majority of students to graduate high school. It is acceptable for them to go to state schools or local institutions. It is also expected that students not engage in misconduct.”
C	“Most students achieve at the expectation level of their parents. Everyone wants to pass the class.”
D	“Expectations for all students are to help your students reach mastery, or an 85 or above. It’s also expected that we close the gap between us and other districts.”
E	“Generally all students are pushed to pass class, and get through. Athletic accomplishments and academic are more equal because of the value of what can be accomplished in addition to academic ability. I push my students to the limit, and give them personal confidence. I try to push students beyond expected limits in the role of a life coach.”

**Interview Question 7: What if any, would be important school building facility projects or improvements?**

Respondent	Response(s)
A	“Improvements have been made already that have an impact, such as the windows and maintaining cleanliness. On the other hand, structurally, everything in the building is too spread out. The roof still leaks in some areas. If there was air-conditioning on the second floor that would improve the instructional setting. Or if skylights were installed in the halls to improve ventilation and circulation of air on the second floor.”
B	“Athletic facilities upgrades are considered more important than an office suite. Upgrades to the pool or surrounding fields will improve athletic involvement. Anything done to upgrade the outside will be aesthetically appealing, and the community would be supportive of civic pride related projects.”
C	“The women’s bathrooms are moldy, dirty, and leaking. There is a lack of cleanliness in classrooms. Daily cleaning would improve that condition. The commons area should be utilized more positively. A student writing center would be a worthwhile building facility project.”
D	“The windows project that is in progress is a great improvement. A bigger weight training room. The current status is fine.”
E	“Classroom upgrades such as painting and aesthetics. Safety changes or improvements to aid supervision and be more feasible for people to navigate. The building is difficult to secure, and improvements would help. All of the bathrooms could be improved so that they are more aesthetically pleasing. Improve room to room communication with the intercoms, or even phones in all classrooms.”
<b>Interview Question 8: Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked or that you think is important to mention?</b>	
Respondent	Response(s)
A	No response.
B	“Our town has always had a strong sense of community. For example, parades, town squares and places to meet. The economy has changed that a little, whereas the town has become more transient, and that could develop an overall change. It could quickly erode the district.
C	“Everyone must be on board to accomplish anything. There are some who are just miserable, and that can be overpowering at times. Perspectives are molded by how you approach your job.”
D	No response.
E	“ ‘Daler’ pride is so important that this community would not fail. What is common is

	to never give up or give in.”
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