



Sustainability and Enduring Impact: Shaping an Intentional Culture of Excellence and Ethics

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Abstract

This article describes the Culture of Excellence and Ethics approach developed by the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE). It lays out the principles of the framework and the rationale for how the approach achieves sustainability and enduring impact in the development of character, leadership, and culture through a balance of theoretical and practical fidelity with theoretical and practical convenience.

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Background

We start with a brief background on the Institute for Excellence & Ethics and the theoretical and historical location of our work to help the reader better understand our framework, and to facilitate connections of our approach to the reader's particular setting. The Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development and dissemination of research-based tools and strategies for building intentional cultures of excellence and ethics. We develop teaching and learning resources, conduct professional development, design and deliver assessment tools and services, and provide organizational consulting. To date we have primarily worked with administrators, educators, students, and parents in K-12 schools (including public, private, Catholic, & charter; urban, rural, and suburban, large and small). We have also increasingly used our knowledge and tools to assist teams, businesses, and other organizations outside the field of education interested in enhanced realization of their goals through the creation of a more intense and intentional culture of excellence and ethics.

The work described in this article is an outgrowth of more than a decade of prior work, primarily rooted in the fields of moral psychology, human ecology and sociology, and evaluation. Our work builds on the work of Lickona (1991), which integrates applied theory and social science into practical and accessible strategies for implementation. The Smart & Good Schools research (Lickona and Davidson, 2005) reflected our evolving quest to synthesize theory and research with sound recommendations for implementation—especially in contexts where

intentional development of character and culture is not widely practiced, like high schools. The *Culture of Excellence & Ethics* framework that we describe in this article reflects three years of field testing with over 50 schools and other clients of an approach to developing character and culture that balances theoretical and practical fidelity with theoretical and practical convenience. Drawing upon the work of Maney (2009), we argue that sustainable implementation and enduring impact on culture and character results from implementation approaches that present a viable convenience-fidelity proposition. We describe our attempts to build rigorous, but flexible approaches to intervention capable of having demonstrable impact, within the many constraints and challenges of real world implementation. We acknowledge here at the outset—and reiterate at the close—that we share in this article is based on what we consider to be small-scale implementation with promising evidence of success. What we present is simply offered as description of our experiences, our assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation, leaving the reader to determine the trustworthiness and utility of what we share.

The evolution of our approach has been driven by a belief in the power of character and culture as an essential catalytic force in the realization of organizational goals—regardless of the organization's specific mission or focus. However, our unfaltering belief in the power of character and culture does not mean that the individuals within the organizations we serve see or believe in the power of character and culture. On the contrary, we are often working with individuals that are stretched, stressed, and skeptical. Thus, in a journal committed

to the integration of leadership and character, we share our ideas and insights as meant for other leaders *of* character who, like us, are not preaching to the proverbial “choir,” but are instead charged with initiating or improving the development of character and culture with individuals who may need to be convinced.

The development of character and leadership is hindered by a cult of misperceptions, misunderstandings, and inaccurate assumptions, which likely results from superficial familiarity with the general idea and importance of the concepts. From this general understanding and acceptance of the power of character emanate extraordinary misperceptions (these are the soft skills, you can’t measure any of this, the best organizations just have better strategy and talent), misunderstandings (you’re born with it, it can’t be taught, it’s too late to develop it), and inaccurate assumptions (we already do this, our people have these skills, we don’t have time or resources for this). These misperceptions, misunderstandings, and inaccurate assumptions undermine sustainability and enduring impact. We view our pragmatic pitch, which taps out a steady message touting the strategic utility and benefits of intentional efforts to shape character and culture, as essential to gaining converts, as well as reconverting the converted to the essential power of intentional culture.

Our framework is built on a “first understand, then be understood” approach. Rather than offering an additional set of goals and objectives, the *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* framework aligns itself to assist organizations in meeting their existing policies and initiatives, thus demonstrating a value-added

proposition—as opposed to a net-loss proposition. The question thus moves from “do we have time and money to spend on developing character and culture?” to “is there a more time- and cost-effective strategy for building the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for reaching our mission, goals, and prevailing policies?” As part of our applied work with organizations, we have refined and revised our “8 Strengths of Character” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) into the following eight areas of focus (Figure 1), which in our experience most closely align with the areas of greatest interest and need for most organizations we serve:



Figure 1

Culture of Excellence & Ethics Competencies

The eight focus areas are not used as specific developmental outcomes, but rather as a heuristic mapping of the areas drawn from our applied research and most often identified in policy initiatives as contributing to or detracting from success in school, work, and beyond.

Culture of Excellence and Ethics Overview

What follows is a very simple distillation of our *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* theory of impact, which we’ll then elaborate upon at

length: Leadership is the act of influencing people by providing vision, strategy, standards and accountability. Leaders influence others most significantly through the shaping of culture. Culture is generally defined as the shared values, beliefs, and operational norms of a group or organization. Leaders shape culture by establishing and reinforcing the shared norms and organizational habits. Through their words and actions leaders are communicating to those in their charge: “This is how we will interact and conduct our business; this is how we will operationalize our values and realize our goals.” Leadership is about getting others to commit to shared goals and the collective good; it’s about motivating and empowering others; it’s about holding self and others accountable. Within the ecology of an organization, shaping culture through leadership takes place at macro- and micro-levels—from the leader of the organization per se, to any person in responsible for shaping the norms and practices of smaller sub-groups. Culture—the shared norms and reinforced behaviors of a group—in turn develops the character habits of individuals. Character competencies—or values in action—become automated habits when they are consistently and pervasively learned, practiced, refined, and reinforced.

A concrete example to demonstrate this more complex process: in one school we observed (Lickona and Davidson, 2005), the leadership held a deep belief in the power and importance of revision in the cultivation of excellence. The leaders of the school saw the values of work ethic, continuous improvement, grit, and perseverance as indispensable in the pursuit of excellence. These values and beliefs informed their specific

approach to grading, which was based on mastery learning (Bloom, 1981) and was articulated in local parlance as: “A, B, and You Ain’t Done yet.” In other words, all students were expected to revise as often as needed to meet the standards for an A or B. Unless or until that standard was met, students were expected to continue revising, which often required multiple revisions to meet the standard of A or B. It’s fair to say that in almost every school revision and grading are a featured practice. But, given the commitment of the leaders to a particular set of values and beliefs and desired outcomes, *how* they implemented the practice of revision was essential. Their intentional organizational habit regarding revision and grading (i.e., their culture) in turn developed a specific set of competencies in students—giving and receiving feedback, persevering in the face of difficulty, finding ways to go beyond a basic mastery, and others. In summary: the leaders shaped the norms; the norms shaped the practices; the practices shaped the character competencies of the individuals in this culture. In our observations of this school, it wasn’t just that they had organizational outcomes to justify their approach (accomplishments, recognition, etc.)—which they clearly did. It was the pervasiveness of their organization way, and its transference to the mindset and habits to its members. There wasn’t a “we just do it this way because they make us”; it was a deeply shared conviction “we do it this way because that’s who we are and how we have been taught.”

Compare the intensity and intentionality of this school’s approach to the character competencies shaped by a school culture operating according to a different norm, say for example, “a one and done,



breadth over depth” approach that requires little or no revision. We believe that positive character and strong leadership habits develop in response to the culture that is intentionally shaped, where every cultural practice and norm is carefully evaluated and practiced with intensity and consistency. This is a subtle but critical contention because too often leadership and character are approached as genetic. Obviously individuals are clearly born with character and leadership strengths, and not all possess the same strengths, or the same level of strengths. However, whatever predisposition to leadership and character you bring to an organization or group, participating in that organization or group according to their norms enforces (or reinforces) individual habits. Thus, if you enter a monastery and live according to their norms and habits, you develop beliefs and habits shaped by that experience; when you enter the military, similar mechanism different outcomes. Bottom line: culture shapes character—either for good or for ill. Organizations can either spend time intentionally shaping the culture to develop the positive habits needed for the realization of core mission, or spend time reactively responding to the negative behaviors shaped by the unintentional de facto culture—what Dewey (1938, 1998) called “mis-education” or “collateral learning.”

This, in essence, represents the foundational belief of our *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* framework. We start by seeking to understand the core mission and objectives of an organization, and then look for ways of enhancing them through an intentional culture. In a case like the school described above, we would work to enhance their mission and goals of mastery learning. Mastery learning, from our perspective, is not better or worse than any other

philosophy or organizational approach. However, whatever the mission and objectives are, we seek to create or enhance the organizational norms so that they are implemented with intentionality and intensity sufficient for developing the requisite character competencies. In this case, a school dedicated to mastery learning must be intentional regarding revision and grading in order to develop the character needed for mastery learning (e.g., grit, perseverance, work ethic, etc.).

We believe in the notion that “character is power”—the catalytic power needed for realization of the core organizational mission. Thus, organizations must maintain an ongoing audit to determine which organizational practices are creating power in support of—and which practices are stealing power from—their core mission. Too often organizations operate under the “it’s-just-a” mindset: it’s just a uniform, it’s just a program, it’s just a banquet, it’s just an assignment, etc. However, when it comes to developing excellence and ethics there are no universally benign practices—all have the potential to turn into an organizational malignancy. Every ritual and organizational practice must be implemented with care, consideration, and monitored faithfully, since every ritual and practice in the life of the organization either contributes to or detracts from the power needed for the core mission. And it’s often the seemingly little but insidious unintentional beliefs and habits, acting at odds or in tension with the stated mission and core practices, which breed institutional cynicism and disunity.

Culture of Excellence and Ethics Framework

The *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* framework is based on the belief that the development of character and

leadership competencies occurs through the impact of an intentional organizational culture, which is facilitated by teaching and learning standards and strategies that target important aspects of the core organizational mission, have theoretical fidelity, and are convenient to implement with fidelity. Herein lies what we see as essential conditions needed for scalable interventions: finding the ideal balance between fidelity and convenience. Drawing on the work of Maney (2009), we recognize that organizations we serve are forced to make a tradeoff between fidelity and convenience. At the simplest level fidelity refers to the rigor, depth, and overall quality; which often operates in tension with convenience, expediency, speed, and usability to operators. Based on the work of Maney (2009), the following graphic (Figure 2) represents four types of convenience–fidelity propositions. Sustainability and enduring impact are derived from a balance of implementation convenience and implementation fidelity that matches organizational need and capacity.

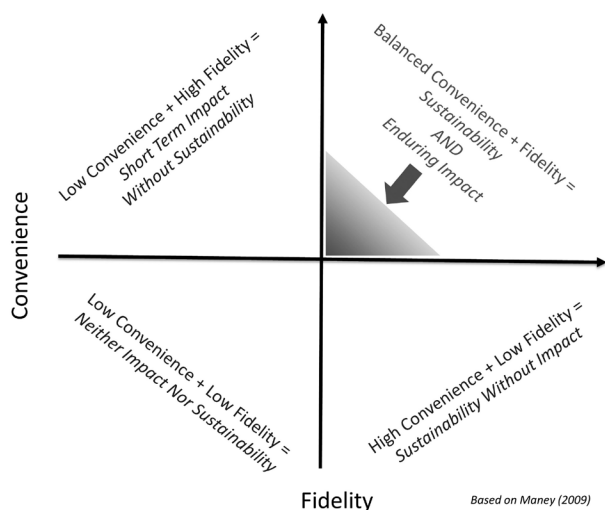


Figure 2

Convenience–Fidelity Proposition

The *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* approach seeks to achieve a balance of implementation convenience and implementation fidelity that matches organizational need and capacity. What follows are five operating principles behind the approach.

1. Identify and develop discrete competencies. A culture of excellence and ethics must by definition include a focus on *both* excellence and ethics, on doing our work well *and* operating according to the norms of justice and care. Developing a “conscience of craft” (Green, 1984) becomes as essential for organizational thriving as developing an ethical conscience about issues of right and wrong. What we presented to the field of education was a paradigm shift (c.f., Lickona & Davidson, 2005, Davidson, Lickona, and, Khmelkov, 2008) from an exclusive focus on moral character (ethics) to a focus on both performance character *and* moral character (excellence *and* ethics) (Figure 3). We define performance character as a mastery orientation. Performance character values such as diligence, work ethic, positive attitude, perseverance, grit, etc. are needed to realize one’s potential for excellence. Moral character is a relational orientation. Moral character values such as integrity, justice, caring, respect, and responsibility are needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior. We argue that both moral and performance character are needed for human and organizational flourishing (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). These two dimensions of character operate in integrated and interconnected ways in individuals or organizations defined by excellence and ethics.

The notion of moral and performance character, excellence and ethics, as integrated and equally



important was a breakthrough in our own work and attracted attention and interest in particular from organizations interested in the bottom line of performance. However, the practical development of moral and performance character in organizations required us to distill complex and multifaceted moral and performance character values into their more discrete competencies. Competencies are process skills that bridge awareness and sensitivity to reasoning and judgment to behavior. For positive behavior to take place, one must recognize the need for specific positive action, to process the contextual requirements, to reason about what action to take, and finally to take action. When skills for each of these processes are fully developed and become automatic, cognition and action become intertwined and an individual consistently engages in positive behavior (see, for example, review of related research in Narvaez, 2006).

Our ability to contextualize and align our work in each organization’s context and according to their

goals and requirements is dependent upon our ability to identify, and then develop and measure the demonstration of values in terms of lived behaviors. Our operational definition of character as values in action plays out in the real world context as a set of competencies or habits: “*individuals who are able to ...*”—give and receive feedback, give others their due, be fair to all involved, continue trying in the face of difficulty, etc. As such, values and competencies are not entirely separate or incompatible, but it’s the competencies that we have found allow for better contextualization and alignment of leaders’ practices to the organization’s mission.

Figure 3 “*Culture of Excellence & Ethics Competencies*” represents units of competencies clustered around our eight areas of focus for which we have built teaching and learning tools, professional development, and curricular materials that we continue to field-test in over 50 schools and athletic teams (drawn primarily from the educational environment, we have begun translating and



Figure 3

From *Smart & Good High Schools* (Lickona & Davidson, 2005)

expanding them for application in other contexts). The focus on identifying and developing discrete competencies has allowed for a more pragmatic implementation approach and a more integrated theoretical approach.

2. Establish an organizational culture characterized by intentional and pervasive teaching and learning norms, rituals, procedures, and habits. Berger (2003) argues that “excellence is born from a culture.” But how, exactly, does that happen? Pick a classroom, family, team, or organization that stands out to you for its exceptionality, and you will invariably find great intentionality regarding their organizational habits—they do things a very specific way, for a very specific reason. There is also intensity: deliberate guided education and practice promotes fidelity; organizational leadership, commitment of resources (especially time), and strong accountability leads to widespread buy-in ensuring that the shared norms are pervasive throughout the organization—not relegated to “pockets of excellence.”

In our experience there are precious few homes, schools, teams, or organizations that are intense and intentional about the development of character and culture. Few are able to identify and describe their “signature practices”—those strategies, norms, or organizational habits that render on its members the “distinguishing marks” (i.e., character) of the organization. Organizations may provide a list of things *they do* (we eat together, we have an awards ceremony, we go away together, etc.), but they often struggle to identify *the* practices that are practiced with intensity and consistency that result in a set of shared ideas, beliefs, and habits that define the

organization—no clear sense that “doing this, this way, is what makes us who we are.” More often we encounter haphazard approaches lacking intentionality and intensity. For example, they may implement some form of goal setting. But few in the organization can link it to a set of organizational beliefs (e.g., talent is important but it’s developed by striving for daily improvement; everybody here is a work in progress; nobody is exempt from continuous improvement), or habits (e.g., the first thing I do when I face a challenge is to identify the overall goal and to break into as many smaller sub-steps as possible; it’s just a personal habit now, born out of the consistent experience of an organizational habit or norm of behavior).

Intense and intentional cultures leave a mark on the individual; as the sociologist Gerald Grant (1985) described it, these are cultures that “imprint.” It’s not just *that* they technically or functionally fulfill their core mission, but rather that the organizational habits—*how* they fulfill their core mission—are done with such intensity and intentionality that a distinctive organization mark is transferred onto the individual, which is evident in their personal habits (i.e., character). For example, a school culture that imprints certainly fulfills its core mission to transfer knowledge from teachers to students; but, in an intentional culture of excellence and ethics there is significant attention paid to developing the character and culture needed for the general philosophy and specific pedagogy, paying as much attention to *how* we do things, as to *what* we do. Individual knowledge surrounding the what, how, and why of organizational norms will obviously vary and have an ebb and flow to it (e.g., newcomers may know that we do things, yet not



fully understand why; senior staff may understand more fully subordinates the deeper rationale for certain practices). However, around the most important organizational practices (the defining or “signature practices” of an organization) there must intentional and ongoing communication, study, and reflection what, why, and how. How will an organization know when they need to be more explicit and intentional about an existing practice or improve our intentionality in a new area? When they are routinely expending resources to reactively respond to problems, inefficiencies, and inconsistencies; when the execution of a practice begins to detract from its intended purpose and the core organizational philosophy and goals; when the lived habits and behaviors conflict with or are in tension with their espoused value.

An effective culture does not happen by chance, it happens by intentional design. The *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* framework is built on the belief that character is shaped by the culture we create: this is how we articulate the mechanism for the impact of our approach. To have an impact, the culture needs to be direct and intentional: it needs to be focused on worthy goals (e.g., pursuit of excellence and ethics), evident in shared norms about how we do business (e.g., use of consistent tools and practices linked to moral and performance character), and continuously lived through actions (e.g., frequent and pervasive leadership/teaching practices and member/learning behaviors). In other words, an intentional culture of excellence and ethics is comprised of teaching practices and learning behaviors that develop the targeted skills and competencies, which all stakeholders use consistently over time, which will require communication, education, assessment, and

accountability.

3. Facilitate intentional culture through explicit implementation standards, tools, and “good enough rubrics.” Fans of the classic do-it-yourself show, *This Old House*, will no doubt recall the time and painstaking detail devoted by host and master carpenter Norm Abrams to the design and construction of jigs, templates, and tools for his projects. The tools were used to improve accuracy and consistency of a repeated process. How often viewers look on in amazement as the master carpenter spent entire shows building a tool, thinking, “Must be nice. We don’t have time or money for our project, let alone to build a tool for *doing* the project.” What did Norm know that we missed? Was it simply that he had the luxury of time and money to invest in the construction of these tools? More likely he knew that the most efficient and effective way to achieve a clearly defined goal was through repeated implementation of a process that produced results matching a consistent standard. Put differently, he knew that the only way to efficiently cut pieces that met the project goals for quality and scale was to develop an automated process. He knew that a freestyle approach, one not guided by a consistent implementation standard would cost more time and money and produce inconsistent results. Thus, his cedar shakes lined up better; his crown molding fit together more tightly; his furniture was stronger and more mechanically efficient.

Norm Abrams, unlike the rest of us do-it-yourselfers, is a master carpenter. So in theory, he probably could have used a freestyle approach with more success than us. But, as a craftsman, he also no doubt realizes that while he *could* pull it off, it is more efficient and effective to

go for a more automated approach, capable of duplication with accuracy and consistency. So whereas a novice like me might think, “I don’t need the assistance of a tool,” experts like Norm think, “this will save me time and money and improve the consistency of my results.” Thus, tools represent a standard procedure to guide implementation, thereby ensuring a consistent standard of output—true for an individual craftsman, but indispensable for any efforts to scale the process to many individuals representing a range of expertise. The end-game is ultimately about saving time and money and improving consistency of results.

In the *Smart & Good High Schools* report (Lickona

& Davidson, 2005) we gathered and synthesized existing research, highlighting important theory and research findings and highlighting “promising practices.” Our experience in the last three years has shown that establishing a convenience-fidelity proposition for enduring impact requires tools, strategies, and delivery methods that are much more specific, replicable, and tightly aligned to policy and mission, while still linked to a rigorous research base. The *Culture of Excellence and Ethics* tools and resources seek to bridge the gap between theory and research on the one hand and the reality of actual day-to-day implementation practices on the other hand. This discovery in our own work is supported in the work of Heath and Heath (2010) who argue that “what looks like resistance is often lack of

Great Attitude (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic about the task/challenge. • Confident in likelihood of success. • Eager for new growth gained from the task/challenge.
Good Attitude (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willing to take on the task/challenge. • Hopeful of success. • Open to new learning and growth.
Bad Attitude (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistant to task/challenge. • Defeated before beginning; convinced of failure. • Defensive of new growth required by the task/challenge.
A Lot of Effort (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued persevering even when difficulties come up. • Tried lots of strategies to overcome failures, setbacks, or limitations in ability.
Some Effort (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave some effort to try and understand the task/challenge. • Worked through some difficulties. • Partially completed the task/challenge.
Little or No Effort (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn’t try at all. • Quit as soon as difficulties came up.

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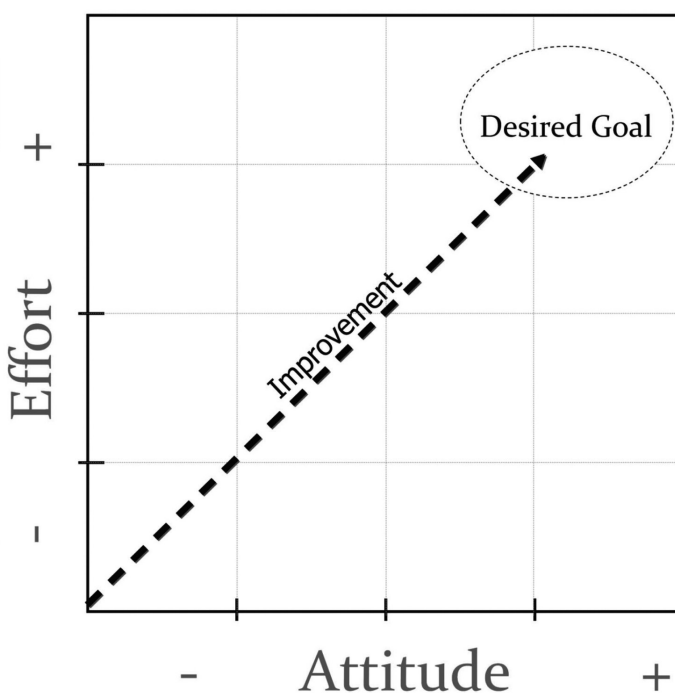


Figure 4

Attitude-Effort-Improvement Rubric

clarity” and that to get past so-called “resistance” or failure to change “crystal-clear direction” must be provided (p. 16-17). Theory and research must be distilled into teaching and learning tools that can be understood, remembered, and used—not exactly surprising. What was surprising was how much further refinement our tools needed to provide the “crystal-clear direction” required for sustainable, impactful implementation.

This led to the creation of a battery of *Culture of Excellence & Ethics* Tools that compress the theoretical fidelity of the existing research into convenient (i.e., simple, concrete, memorable, action-oriented) norms for behavior. They provide “good enough heuristics” to guide behavior (Narvaez, 2006). For example, through our field research process we created a *Culture of Excellence & Ethics Attitude-Effort-Improvement rubric* (Figure 4).

Would my decision pass each of these tests?	Yes	No
Golden Rule Test: If the situation was reversed, is this how I would want to be treated?		
Fairness Test: Is this fair to everybody involved in and affected by my actions?		
Truth Test: Does this represent the whole truth—no distortions, omissions, or spin?		
Conscience Test: Will I feel good about this afterwards (no regrets, no guilt)?		
Parent Test: Will my parents be proud of this?		
Front-Page Test: Would I want this reported on the front-page of the newspaper?		
Consequences Test: Will this lead to positive consequences and avoid negative consequences now or in the future?		
What-If-Everybody-Did-This Test: Would I want to live in a world where everybody did this?		
Guiding Beliefs Test: Would this be supported by the philosophical, religious, political, and/or ideological worldviews guiding my life?		

Figure 5
Integrity-in-Action Checklist

Developed in alignment with the research base on achievement motivation and talent development (e.g., Dweck, 2006; Pink, 2009; Colvin, 2008; Ericsson et al., 2006), it provides what is simple (improvement in attitude + improvement in effort = improvement toward your desired goal) and memorable (defining the attitude and effort anchors in concrete, observable terms). It is simple, but not simplistic—and certainly not easy. Faithful use of this tool over time is required for it to become an operational cultural norm, and for those operating in that culture to develop the actual competencies. How long it takes for changes in character and culture obviously depends on the frequency, pervasiveness, and overall quality of the implementation practices. These “tools” provide implementation standards, intentional norms guiding action and reflection; consistent and pervasive operation according to these norms define a school’s way (i.e., culture),

which in turn shapes the character of those operating according to that way. Or, as Narvaez states: “heuristics are intuitions built from repeated experiences which are retained in implicit memory systems” (2006, p. 12).

Our *Culture of Excellence & Ethics Integrity-in-Action Checklist* (Figure 5) is a second example demonstrating another tool for the intentional shaping of culture and character, this time focusing on ethical decision making—an important topic given the prevalence of cheating (c.f., McCabe, 2001; Callahan, 2004) and the pernicious way that cheating undermines the culture of excellence and ethics. Our *Culture of Excellence &*

Ethics Integrity-in-Action Checklist features nine dichotomous tests that provide a template for putting integrity in action.

In this case it required turning nine things to consider into nine dichotomous tests, and providing clear instructions about how to interpret the response set. This rubric provides another “good enough” heuristic to guide thinking and behavior, such that with consistent and pervasive use it becomes the organizational way, which shapes individual habits and behavior. It’s simple and memorable; however, it’s feasibility features don’t guarantee organizational buy-in or impact. These come from pervasive delivery through stand-alone lessons/classes, and when integrated throughout the life of the organization (buy-in and impact also result from the balance of convenience and fidelity described below). These are just two of the more than fifty tools for building the culture of excellence and ethics that we have built and field-tested (including, for example, tools on constructive criticism, collaboration, communication, negotiation, leadership, and life-goals and purpose).

Scaffold now from the previous discussion of the role of tools for saving time, money, and ensuring the consistency of result to the challenge of helping organizations as they build an intentional culture of excellence and ethics. The *Culture of Excellence & Ethics* approach facilitates the shaping of the culture, as well as teaching and learning experiences, by providing teaching and learning tools and strategies that 1) help introduce the required skills in (a) stand-alone course and/or (b) integrated into normal activities; 2) allow instructors/leaders

to continuously return to the practice of the skill/competency in an ongoing way (repeated practice over time) or in new and different contexts (repeated practice through application to different situations); 3) allow for continuous practice of the skill/competency; 4) can also be used by others in the organization to reinforce the practice of the skill/competency (guidance of practice by others). The *Culture of Excellence & Ethics* tools are designed to be used multiple times in multiple contexts by multiple stake-holders, resulting in intentional and pervasive practices that over time begin to characterize the school culture. For a teaching/learning framework to be adopted and sustained over time, it needs, in turn, to balance *convenience* and *fidelity* to match organizational need and capacity.

4. Initiation, maintenance, and overall sustainability of intervention must be convenient. Regardless of our belief in its overall importance to achieving an organization’s goals, the development of character and culture must be understood as the catalyst to the core mission, not the core mission. To put it even more directly: the military does not exist to develop character and leadership; businesses don’t exist to develop creativity and ingenuity; schools don’t exist to develop ethical citizens. Implementation fidelity, sustainability, and enduring impact of efforts to develop character, leadership and culture are predicated on enhancing the core mission (i.e., they are instrumental for the mission, not the mission in themselves). Simply put, organizations that we serve want to know: how does the time and money spent on developing character and culture enhance the realization of performance goals? Do our students learn better if we teach them how to set



goals, communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate integrity and emotional intelligence? Will I spend less time stamping out problem behaviors, reactively responding to distractions, and improve my bottom line? Will we have stronger collegiality, trust, and respect? Will we outperform our resources? Will our teams perform better and win more? The essential buy-in results when individuals believe that the benefits of doing things a particular way outweigh cost of doing them another way (or not doing it at all).

Developing the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for teaching and learning thus becomes our overriding focus when we work in the school context. Cooperation, communication, collaboration, negotiation, integrity, grit, work ethic, effort and attitude—these are needed for learning today, this afternoon, for this particular activity or context. A contextualized view allows us to approach each situation as having its own challenges and requisite skills. We simulate for the most common situations you will face in this specific context. Training you for good character and leadership generally is too amorphous to teach or learn—certainly to assess. A math teacher or science teacher must understand that teaching math well involves habits for learning—work ethic, attitude, effort, willingness to revise, give and receive feedback, etc. There is content knowledge to be gained, but also *how* you learn math develops habits of the mind, or character habits. You need both *for* learning; you will develop both *from* learning. A business leader must understand the context of their business as a challenge course and understand and develop the culture and competencies needed for success: communication,

coordination, negotiation, ability to balance short- and long-term goals. Organizations may recruit for ability matched to needs, but the culture must be designed to identify and develop organizational habits that in turn shape individual character and leadership habits. How do you get a well-rounded leader, or person of character? It's developed through situational experience in many different contexts. But pragmatically speaking the buy-in for the teacher, coach, or manager to spend time and attention on these habits is that it enhances the ease and consistency for meeting performance standards.

There are two important dimensions within our notion of convenience: theoretical convenience and practical convenience. *Theoretical convenience* is the extent to which programming is designed to support the core mission of the organization. The theoretical convenience of our approach in the school context is the programming's utility for meeting pressing student challenges (e.g., discipline problems, hard to reach students, etc.) and for addressing pressing policy requirements. For example, in a K-12 public school context, school administrators face acute pressure to link their school improvement plans to alignment and adherence with federal, state, and/or district policy requirements. These are priority issues for school administrators that are deemed worthy of time and money, since failure to demonstrate alignment and adherence to these requirements will result in lost economic support and other sanctions or consequences. School administrators, staff, students, and families are jointly impacted by the acute challenges that detract from teaching and learning: cheating, bullying, unsafe climate, disciplinary problems; lack of collegiality, trust, and professionalism; lack of parent participation and

support of learning at home and school. Focus on building shared norms and practices that combat these acute challenges is at the core of theoretical convenience of the tools and strategies we deliver. What makes it convenient is simply that energy and resources focused on developing character and culture has the potential to eradicate or diminish core organizational challenges, paving the way for enhanced realization of mission, goals, and objectives.

Implementation convenience means the total feasibility with which programming can be acquired and used. Implementation convenience represents a ratio of the following major elements: (a) financial cost and human/time cost, (e.g., to be trained, to prepare for delivery of lessons/materials, for actual delivery of lessons/materials, including management, etc.), relative to (b) time recovered (e.g., from better strategies for handling persistent problems, from better strategies and implementation guidance, etc.) and ease and satisfaction for stakeholders (e.g., easy to teach, useful and effective by implementers).

Adding, changing or revising organizational initiatives is commonplace in any organization. Every change, addition, or revision is initiated for its presumed value-add; however, as important for consideration is the associated (but often hidden) cost. This is especially true of new programs or mandates. There is often organizational cynicism around new initiatives, since they often arrive with great fanfare and at great cost of time and money, only to be replaced shortly thereafter with a new program or priority. New mandates and initiatives are also often viewed as knee-jerk, as motivated by

public relations, and response to crisis. On the other hand, new initiatives and mandates are often doomed before they begin due to insufficient conditions for success: insufficient money, time, leadership support and accountability, and stakeholder buy-in, to name a few. It has been said that every goal has a margin. Implementation convenience takes this truism to heart. It will take precious resources to build an intense and intentional culture of excellence and ethics—resources that come with a real cost to the organization. Therefore, efforts to develop the culture and competencies must not duplicate, distract, or conflict with core programs, goals, and objectives. The time and money proactively spent must be time and money saved from reactive response and from collateral damage to and/or distraction from the core organizational mission.

5. Convenience must be balanced with theoretical & implementation fidelity. Whereas convenience is often the prevailing concern at the implementation level (is it fast, flexible and easy to implement), concerns for fidelity are no less important. Who cares whether it's fast, flexible, and easy, if it's ineffective. Thus, concerns with convenience must be balanced with concerns for fidelity. *Theoretical fidelity* means that there is theoretical and empirical depth and rigor behind the approach, as well as behind each teaching and learning standard and strategy. Does a poster on the wall have theoretical fidelity? Not if it's a pretty picture and an inspirational motto, since there is no theoretical or empirical basis to suggest that slogans, mantras, and inspirational posters define culture or change character. But there is theoretical fidelity if that poster is a tool that, similar to the Attitude-Effort-Improvement Rubric, is linked to



the theory and science of achievement motivation and the development of expertise, and if that poster promotes replicable strategies that become consistently and pervasively used. Theoretical fidelity of our approach is enhanced through ongoing collection of formative feedback and a continuous cycle of continuous improvement to build tools that connect the most persistent challenges to the most effective research-based intervention strategies.

Implementation fidelity refers to the consistent and effective use of programming, including the following major elements: (1) frequency of use (e.g., how frequently are the tools used—generally, and in relation to the situations where the tool should/could be used); (2) pervasiveness (e.g., what percentage of stakeholders are using the tools and strategies); (3) quality (e.g., how close to its recommended or intended use is the tool actually being used). The framework strives to offer a convenience–fidelity proposition that leads to sustainability and enduring impact. The convenience–fidelity balance is achieved through flexible implementation approaches for delivery of the concrete teaching and learning tools.

Summary

What does a balance of convenience–fidelity look like in action? A brief example: This past year a school contacted us and was looking for a professional development training day. Our plans for the day took shape by learning about their school improvement plan goals, and based on benchmark data they gathered from teachers and students using our *Culture of Excellence & Ethics Assessment* (Khmelkov et al., 2009). We then prepared and delivered a *Culture or Excellence Professional Development Toolkit* training built around several

of our research-based tools specifically targeted to their goals. According to the evaluations from the training, the participants really enjoyed the experience. While nice to hear positive response to the training itself, what truly matters is how often, in what situations, and with what frequency, quality and impact the participants use the tools and strategies on which they have been trained.

We returned several times throughout the year to this particular school and observed the tools and strategies being put in action, including the Effort-Attitude-Improvement rubric described above. “This school is on fire with the Attitude & Effort Rubric,” said one administrator. Teachers across all grades are using the tools—with gifted students and struggling students; with students struggling socially and academically; with students but also with parents. And teachers are changing how they do business revisiting curriculum, assessment, grading, report cards and many other aspects of the culture. The staff are also using other culture shaping tools from their initial training (the Compact for Excellence Tool for shaping group norms and accountability, the Win-Win Negotiation Tool for more intentional conflict resolution, and the Two-Way Communication Tool for improved interpersonal communication, collaboration, and conflict management). So, a more helpful evaluation of the training day has emerged over time: most of the teachers are using nearly all of the tools they were trained on with nearly all of their students and parents. In short, they have changed how their organizational habits or norms, which in turn will begin to impact the individual character of those they serve. (The school currently has anecdotal evidence of impact on discipline

and academic enhancement; they also gathered formative data on implementation that will guide fidelity of implantation, and they have begun to gather outcome data that in the future will provide more rigorous over-time evidence of impact.) They also added additional professional development to add to their toolbox of intentional strategies and standards for strengthening other aspects of their organizational habits, and will continue to collect data to guide their organizational growth. In the spring following the professional development they collected data to bench.

A single day training is not a panacea. What really matters and has impact is what those trained do after the training and how intense, intentional, and pervasive those practices become. We recognize developing character and culture takes time and money and is not quick or easy. We recognize that more intense training, curriculum, coaching, and assessment would often be required. However, a framework that uses specific tools and strategies (i.e., implementation standards) to shape culture and develop competencies with conviction and intensity, intentionality, and consistency as described above, represents a “tech effect” (Maney, 2009) that makes the shaping of character and culture more efficient and effective than once believed possible. We are

in the process of developing more advanced use metrics, which will assist greatly in quantifying process of changing organizational habits (culture) and the resulting change in character and leadership competencies.

At this point in our work we believe we have built the framework and tools and have conducted a small-scale implementation with promising evidence of success indicating that individuals and organizations can successfully use the *Culture of Excellence & Ethics* framework, tools, and strategies toward the realization of a more intense and intentional culture of excellence and ethics. In the next phase of our work we will look to embark on a validation project featuring a medium-to-large scale implementation with more rigorous assessment to establish strong evidence of success. Having completed the validation phase, we will use the strong evidence of established success to undertake large-scale implementation. The completion of these three phases of work will signify the true realization of our goals of sustainability and enduring impact.



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