Strong employee development can create positive program culture

Support increases confidence, leads to ownership of strategies

By Georgia Hall

Program climate and program culture are terms that have been used interchangeably to describe the global impression or distinct characteristics of a program. Although the terms have been used synonymously, the two terms have distinct differences.

Program climate refers to the ambiance generated from the program space and the feelings that are generated that give the program its character. Program climate can range from warm and nurturing to cold and uninviting. The most successful programs are those where the children, faculty and staff members feel supported, valued and respected. The climate within a program is the result of how the relationships between the staff members and youth are formed and nurtured.

When applied to programs, culture is used to describe the perceived values, expectations, traditions and shared beliefs that exist daily within a program. Part of program culture is the development of perceived values, expectations, traditions and shared beliefs that exist within a program.

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Change strategies

School climate and culture literature can help us think about how best to effect change in a program climate and culture. One of the most successful methods of changing climate is to strengthen employee development. When staff members feel supported, their skill level and commitment increases and they start to take ownership of the changes. If staff members believe that they can help change the climate of the program, they are more likely to commit to the process. According to Peters and Waterman (1982), “nothing is more enticing than the feeling of being needed, which is the magic ingredient that produces high expectations” and results.

Changing the climate of a program takes time, dedication and commitment. When planning strategies to improve program-wide climate, changes should be focused on collective professional development within the program rather than on individual professional goals (Fullen, 1985). Before initiating changes, staff members should have a clear understanding of the reasons for the change and, most important, be on board. Considerations should be made for possible resistance from staff members and youth because of past experiences and the current culture. The planned strategies should be specific to the desired outcome for the individual program. Open and continuous communication and support for staff members and the youth are key elements in making the planned transitions and changes a success.

The research suggests that before implementing any program or school culture changes, an assessment of the program’s ability and a willingness to change should be established (Nathan & Hare, 2001; Boyd, 1992). Any changes to the current way things are done within a program will affect relationships, attitudes and core beliefs that can either work toward a positive outcome or be counterproductive and serve as an obstacle to learning success (Boyd, 1992). New objectives and cooperative teamwork are necessary change elements for programs to become healthier places (Friedland, 1999). Each member of the program must be able to “experience high levels of caring, respect and expectation for their successes as well as a capacity for influencing what goes on in the program” in order to contribute and be committed to the change effort (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988 as cited by Boyd). A number of after-school program assessment tools, such as the Afterschool Program Practices Tool and the Youth Program Quality Assessment, can support program improvement and climate or culture change efforts.

References


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