

CULTURE BUILDER EXEMPLAR: GABE FLICKER

Gabe Flicker, principal of Grace Lutheran School, has built a culture that has captured the imagination of parents, the community of Pocatello, Idaho, and numerous charitable foundations and organizations. Everyone is standing in line to be a part of this success story.

During his first week on the job, Gabe hung his school's purpose statement in the entryway.¹ You can't miss the four-inch-high red and blue letters that proclaim what the school is all about. When he gives an orientation tour to brand-new families, the first stop on the tour is always in front of the framed statement where he explains its meaning. He also makes sure that new staff and board members understand the school's purpose. And just to make certain they take him seriously, Gabe gives a little test every now and then during the school year. If newcomers don't pass his first test, they will definitely have the purpose statement memorized before the second test rolls around. A second stop on the orientation tour is the National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Citation signed by the President of the United States. Grace Lutheran received the second one ever given in the state of Idaho. With these simple acts, Gabe is doing what organizational theorists call *purposing*—"engaging in a continuous stream of actions ... which have the effect of inducing clarity, consensus, and commitment regarding the organization's basic purposes" (Vaill, 1986, p. 91).

When difficult decisions need to be made, clarity is achieved by evaluating the issue in the light of the purpose statement. Gabe explains, "This process has given our school community a cohesive spirit and focus." Visitors to the Grace campus can see the purpose statement at work in the sixteen new classrooms that have been built and the eleven additional acres of prime land that have been acquired for expansion. They can see the culture Gabe has built reflected in the academic success of the students and the teamwork and leadership of the teachers. Achievement test scores average above the eighty-fifth percentile, and since Gabe first posted the purpose statement inside the front door, enrollment has grown from about 100 students to nearly 400. Gabe's culture building efforts aren't just confined to the walls of his school. Every third year, he takes the staff on a three-day retreat to a mountain lodge for team building. Training and group sessions are held during the day, and the staff hikes or bikes in the evenings. Gabe explains, "This is a great way for

staff members to build quality professional relationships that lead to a positive work environment.” When his new building was under construction, Gabe joined a group of church and family volunteers to do his part with a hammer and saw. He wasn’t just building walls; he was building a strong and positive school culture.

“It’s the little things that communicate to parents what the culture of a school is like,” says Gabe. “For example, each spring we have daffodils blooming in the playground planter areas. The bulbs were planted by students.

“When a school community feels it’s really in control of its destiny, teachers, parents, and administrators are more inclined to do the hundreds of little things it takes to make their school work. When people are doing something they believe in, they do it better. There’s more passion.”

—Manna (1999)

Gabe was interviewing a new family and asked his usual question: “Why did you choose Grace Lutheran?” The mother’s answer was a new one to him:

“Any school that can motivate kids to respect the spring flowers must have good learning and discipline.”

Gabe observes, “As educators we often focus on the “big things,” like our new building and the technology center. Parents, on the other hand, notice the little things, like the fact that our students are so proud of their school, they wouldn’t dream of picking the daffodils.”

You can be sure that the daffodil story will be told to teacher candidates, prospective families, and to the many individuals and groups from whom Gabe continues to solicit grants and funds to enhance the services at Grace Lutheran. It’s a powerful story, and storytelling is a very important part of culture building.

Gabe is quick to point out that he doesn’t have a built-in clientele or an automatic source of support. “Unless we have a culture that people *want* to be a part of, we won’t have students or get paychecks. People contribute to the future of our school because they see a culture that supports both achievement

and character.”

How does one build a culture from scratch? Gabe can tell you. Hire the very best people you can find. Empower them to do what they do best. Provide a warm, loving, and secure environment. Be willing to serve your students, parents, and teachers in any way you can, whether it’s providing hot cinnamon rolls and coffee before school or mopping up a spill in the entryway. Bring parents and community members into your school as valued partners. Settle conflicts and differences before the sun sets and definitely within twenty-four hours. Send out newsletters and newspapers; communicate with parents via a Web site and E-mail. But more important than anything, Gabe says, “Have a vision that is bigger than the Idaho wilderness—one that makes people’s jaws drop when they first hear it.”

These are the “big things.” Gabe’s most powerful communication and relationship-building techniques, however, are the “little things” he does regularly, like handing out kudos at staff meetings and expecting staff members to keep the positive comments flowing or being out in the hallway every morning and afternoon to greet students and parents with a cheery hello or a warm hug.

“Storytelling is one of the oldest ways in the world to convey the values and ideals shared by a community.”

—Kouzes and Posner (1999, p. 14)