

# 10 REMINDERS FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN CHANGING TIMES

BY KIRAN BIR SETHI

**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 seeding and cultivating culture? I believe it starts with leadership, and it is more about what leaders do rather than what they say. When I was setting up Riverside in 2001, we looked at culture as an essential component. In hindsight, the fact that we grew gradually was a blessing – 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 these years, we have moved from vision to action by constant co-creation. The COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed that it is culture that can shift the lens to look at ‘crisis as an opportunity’.

In fact, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the most urgent and important work that leaders do to build culture. These lessons

help us to understand how, in teams that already had a built-in culture of collaborative spirit and innovation with an iterative mindset, there was an ease with change. On the other hand, schools that didn't place as much emphasis and importance on culture, found that they struggled with teams that couldn't easily adapt. Stress levels were high and a lot of friction and tension was experienced.

Setting the culture in motion is an ongoing effort and not without some slips and misses. Through this article, I share ten ideas that have worked for us both instinctively and through practice, and have helped us to stand tall in these unprecedented times.

## 1. CULTURE IS A SHARED SET OF VALUE SYSTEMS AND BEHAVIOURS

What many leaders miss is the opportunity to build cultures by recognising that people build the culture, and not a single practice. This is 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, the focus is on pedagogy and curriculum in schools. As a team, we realised early that our ecosystem was built on several touchpoints with our various stakeholders, such as 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.

COVID helped remind us how important shared beliefs and value systems were. Very often during a crisis the expectation is that a leader has to play the primary role to lift the load and shape the way forward. At no point did we have to impress upon any of our team members that it was a shared responsibility and that their competencies, skill sets and contributions were important to lift the load. I had the time, not to lift the load, but to position it and direct it where it was needed.

The requirement suddenly to go digital was not necessarily a shared competency, but the very fact that we had a collaborative spirit already in the ecosystem meant that nobody highlighted anyone's lack of skill. On the contrary, there came a collaborative spirit of cooperation. And, at all times we kept coming back to purpose: did we rise to the occasion? Did we do right by our children?

## 2. WHILE BUILDING CULTURE, DON'T MISS THE WHO AND THE WHY

If leaders spent more time determining the WHO and the WHY, the WHAT and the HOW would never be a concern. Building a culture is a slow process since it is a human-centred interaction, so to think that everybody will get it just because the process has been clearly defined as a written policy is an ambitious prospect. 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.

The COVID lesson here was that we were mindful that lots of our team members were struggling and had their own stresses. We realised that if our children were to have a sense of wellbeing, our teachers had to have it first. While the stretch of learning the new skills was a reality, we were very careful that there was no stress at the time or lack of support. We were also mindful of involving families with the understanding that the culture had to exist outside the school.

It is interesting how the online mode actually allowed us to have many more touchpoints. Suddenly, we were not constrained by time as the team wasn't going home at 3 o'clock. As long as we were mindful of the teachers' other responsibilities, time really was fluid and actually worked to our advantage.





# SCHOOL CULTURE IS MORE ABOUT WHAT LEADERS DO RATHER THAN WHAT THEY SAY

## 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.

One mindset that helped us sail through the pandemic was that ‘it’s okay not to know and that we can always learn’ – whether it is tech or how to deal with an emotional situation, or take a decision on managing funds. Another belief system here which we challenged was ‘who is the teacher and who is the learner?’. We were leaning on the kids all the time!

## 4. EMBRACE AN ITERATIVE MINDSET

Be open to the fact that things change. When you are listening, you will be informed. In these times, building a culture of iteration is a strong way for innovation and growth.

One of the things we did was to fall back on our time-tested philosophy of co-creation. We co-created the design decisions and crafted the way forward in challenging times with parents, children, support teams and all stakeholders. Therefore, we were very comfortable that nothing was set in stone and were okay with the new process being iterated by going back to the drawing board as and when necessary.

## 5. BRING SELF-WORTH TO YOUR PEOPLE

This reassures each person that they are valuable and have their place in the organisation. It comes from intentionality in a leader – when you are intentional about taking time for each person, through congenial meetings, collegial support and mentoring. When people walk into the school ecosystem and see fewer complaints and pettiness, they see that this is the way to go. Remember to timetable for personal and professional development as a way to nurture the heart and the mind.

Even through COVID, we amplified a lot of what we did by way of applauding and appreciating the team and ensuring their wellbeing. The focus was such that everybody, including the children and parents, felt noticed and heard.

## 6. LEAD FROM YOUR STRENGTHS AND NOT WEAKNESSES

Leaders must appreciate the value of leading from competency rather than positional authority.

When you lead from your weaknesses, ego, defensiveness and frustration often come into play. When you are self-aware and recognise your limitations, you will bring in people who are competent to do the job.

When we were hit with the challenges thrown up by COVID, I clearly put myself out there, accepting that I am not the tech expert. I communicated to the team that I was leaning on them and the children to guide me. My responsibility was to keep the joy and optimism alive and directed towards the common goal. It became a collaborative spirit of cooperation and everybody had their mentors and their mini circles of inputs.



## 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’ 24/7. Our culture naturally evolved as one of collaboration and completion rather than competition. Together, we have been testing new practices, seeding them into the system and evaluating which work best to be rolled out into the following year.

Since we had taken time to build the blocks, when we had to climb the learning curve that was very steep we were ready for it!

## 8. 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 fosters audacity. Since it takes time to grow into a leadership role, be mindful in nurturing your second and third tiers of leadership.

What we realised was that in an online school it was not easy to check in on people like we did in the physical space. Nevertheless, the school continued to work on the strong foundation of trust that we had built with each team member. It was incredible how much ownership and leadership teachers took.

## 9. 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.



### THE AUTHOR

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In these difficult times, as a leader, my key responsibility has been to offer the right support at the right time. Also, after the first couple of months, when the team took over and strong leadership had been built, I started to step in only when needed. It was like bonus time that I could use to engage with other initiatives for furthering our vision and philosophy.

## 10. PRESERVE YOUR ORGANISATION’S CULTURE AMIDST CHALLENGES

Culture blends with a leader’s ability to foresee challenges. 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 and reassures them that they do not need to struggle to voice their concerns or problems. In a crisis, the more transparent you are, the more the team will be there when times are good and you will be able to invite their trust back.

I think we are getting more confident about our design of the hybrid model. Going forward it will shape the new Riverside 2.0 as we continue to be inspired by Gandhi’s words: “Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into.” The aim of 2021 is making sure that we get back to what really matters as empowered humane citizens.

And yes, remember to 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!