

What is the Difference between Culture and Climate?

Climate and culture are often used interchangeably by school leaders. However, the literature differentiates these inter-related concepts in important ways. Climate describes the shared perceptions of the people in a group or organization, while culture includes how people feel about the organization and the beliefs, values, and assumptions that provide the identity and set the standards of behavior (Stolp & Smith, 1995).

Simply stated, culture refers to “the way we do things around here” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, Loc 108 of 1537). Climate, on the other hand, refers to *the feel* of the school environment. Both impact behaviors of the people in the group, but climate is viewed as a narrower concept than culture. Culture goes deeper to include the immediate environment and what people believe and value. Culture is a product of the relationship history in a school while climate is a function of how people perceive those relationships in the present (Stolp & Smith, 1995).

According to Dr. Wayne Hoy (1990), organizational climate of a school is a set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members. It is the relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behavior, and is based on their collective perceptions of the behavior in schools.

Organizational culture is a system of shared orientations that hold the unit together and gives it a distinctive identity. Three symbol systems communicate the basic contents of an organization’s culture: stories, icons, and rituals.

- Stories are narratives that are based on true events, but they frequently combine facts and fiction. Some are myths and some are legends.
- Icons are physical artifacts that are used to communicate culture for example, logos, mottoes, and trophies.
- Rituals are the basic ceremonies that provide tangible examples of what is important in the organization.

The subtle differences between climate and culture are important for any leader to understand. Effective superintendents attune themselves to the climate and culture of the schools and district to foster a safe, orderly environment that is student-centered, high performing, and embraces continuous improvement.

Resources

Deal, T. E. and Peterson, K. D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership*.

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hoy, W. (1990) Organizational climate and culture: A conceptual analysis of the school workplace. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 1(2) 149-168.

Stolp, S., & Smith, S. C. (1995). *Transforming school culture: stories, symbols, values, and the leader's role*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.