



Podcast Script – Leading Your Organization’s Culture and Climate

Host/Interviewer (H)

Guest (G) – Mary Peterson

- H:** Welcome listeners! My name is Sarah, a training and curriculum specialist on the U.S. Department of Education’s You for Youth Technical Assistance Team. In this podcast series, we investigate how to define a positive organizational culture. We will speak with a practitioner who will share her best practices for cultivating an organizational culture and climate that is aligned with their vision, mission and values. And with that, I’d like to introduce you to Mary, a project director for three 21st CCLC sites with over three years’ experience in afterschool. Mary has built a positive organizational culture through continuously modeling her organization’s core values. An organization’s mission and vision are driven by their core values which in turn builds a positive culture and climate. By modeling her organization’s core values, Mary discusses how staff behavior should align with the organization’s culture. Whether you are establishing the culture and climate at a new site or shifting one that already exists, it takes consistent leadership to create a strong culture and climate. Mary, thank you so much for joining us.
- G:** Thank you. I’m happy to be here.
- H:** Can you start by telling us a bit about the sites from when you first started with 21st CCLC?
- G:** Sure. When I started, the district-based program had an existing site in its fourth year of 21st CCLC programming and another site was in its third year.
- H:** Since the sites were already in existence, they had established cultures.
- G:** That’s right. The culture of the programs had been established before I began. So as someone new to these programs, I began by spending time reviewing the program’s mission as well as getting to know the staff and sites.
- H:** What is the focus of your mission?
- G:** The after school programs shared the district’s mission to provide an environment which cultivates maximum student potential. The district and our programs see student learning as including academic, intellectual, social, and personal development. Additionally, our programs really wanted to put an emphasis on social emotional learning.
- H:** Thereby elevating a “whole child” focus.
- G:** Yes! To fulfill the mission, our organizational culture needs to embrace social and emotional learning. The program must provide opportunities for positive youth development, which means enacting core values such as respect and trust.
- H:** For our listeners, can you describe what types of actions or behaviors that are necessary for demonstrating respect and trust?





Podcast Script – Leading Your Organization’s Culture and Climate

- G:** Of course! We demonstrate respect by listening to the youth in a caring and non-judgmental manner. While we may disagree with what they are saying, it is still their experience and there is value in hearing out their perspective. For trust, it’s about building an environment where students feel both physically and psychologically safe. This means consistently and fairly applying the rules – and extending that consistency in every interaction. Students feel safe when they know you and your staff do what you say you will do.
- H:** After you started then, how did you ensure that your organization’s climate reflected these values of respect and trust?
- G:** I started with trust, recognizing and honoring everyone’s humanity, through relationship building.
- H:** Can you elaborate?
- G:** For starters, I have an open-door policy and it’s lived every day. I want every person who steps through the door to feel supported and listened to. These practices build trust between me and staff members, which leads them to feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly. I do this by quietly listening, asking questions and thanking them for sharing – whether they are sharing something professional or personal. It’s really important for everyone involved with the sites to feel comfortable sharing information and opinions if the program is going to continually improve.
- G:** How the open-door climate affected staff?
- H:** Programs work well when they have committed teams behind them. I knew that for my team to remain committed, they needed to trust that I will do what I said I would do. So, in practice, if I agree to do something, I do it. Or, if a member of my team has a new idea or wants to take the lead, I almost always give them the go-ahead. When people feel supported, they feel comfortable taking risks. They know if something doesn’t go quite right, they will get the constructive feedback they need to make improvements – not a slap on the wrist. I have worked very hard to foster a culture where my team trusts me. This opens them up to receiving feedback and sharing ideas constructively.
- H:** And you developed this process over time with your staff, correct?
- G:** Process is the correct term for sure. Establishing trust through relationship building takes time. People need time to see if you’re honest and consistent.
- H:** It sounds like you were able to model the program’s core values through leadership practices. Why is modeling as a leader important?
- G:** I studied different leadership styles and their impact; I recognized the one I’m most comfortable with and the one most likely to empower others. In order to truly make an impact, I must model the climate I expect in my programs. And since I’m in the business of





Podcast Script – Leading Your Organization’s Culture and Climate

empowering youth, I must model empowerment for my staff. Besides it’s really not just about how you treat children and youth, it’s about how you treat others.

- H:** How does this approach impact students?
- G:** Creating a culture and climate that demonstrates the organization’s values of trust and respect impacts students. If I’m modeling respect and trust through listening and providing space for staff to have a program voice, they in turn provide this space for students. If students feel they have a voice, they’ll use it. If they feel their voice is respected, they won’t be afraid to share critical information. I also model how to create this space for student voice through one small practice; I hold monthly student focus groups. I ask students about their opinions of the program, what they think they can be doing better and what the staff can do to support them. These conversations then inform programmatic decisions. Students’ voice and choice in a program are incredibly important. If students play a role in the development of the program, they will be more likely to enjoy and engage in the activities, and then, like I said, they attend more regularly.
- H:** What you just described is how your climate indicates the core value of trust and respect to students, correct?
- G:** Yep! The student focus groups demonstrate that we trust and respect students’ opinions and thoughts.
- H:** It sounds like your culture and climate trickles down consistently from you to staff to student. And if all staff are living out the organization’s core values, you’re on the path to meeting your vision and fulfilling your mission. The program becomes one with a positive culture and climate.
- G:** Definitely! I’m always observing staff. Looking for how they’re using my modeled practices to inform their own interactions with students, families and other staff.
- H:** What have you observed?
- G:** Staff taking time to listen to students. Instead of making assumptions or commenting on an incident staff will say, “Tell me what happened.” And then they listen. Students are much more likely to own their mistakes or share their missteps with an adult if adults listen and respond calmly. Staff also ask students for input on projects or activities; offering up opportunities for student voice and choice in the session or club.
- H:** How do these core values of respect and trust easily extend to interactions with program families? How are your program families experiencing the program’s culture?
- G:** I’m very conscious of how my staff and I communicate with our families. When working with children, you must ask parents and family members what they think. They know their children best. Once again, when people feel like their voice matters and is respected, they



Podcast Script – Leading Your Organization’s Culture and Climate

will be more invested. And you need that investment. Families’ perceptions of the program are a key driver of student retention.

- H:** Families really do feel the culture of the building when they are dropping off or picking up the students or when they are interacting with staff. For example, other 21st CCLC sites might hold monthly coffee chat focus groups enabling them to listen to family concerns. If staff are hearing families say things like, “the afterschool staff always listens when I talk to them,” or “when I ask a question, the staff here always answer or get back to me with the answer” they are describing the specific behaviors leadership has asked staff to demonstrate. When this occurs, leaders can be assured families’ members are experiencing the culture in the intended manner.
- G:** Exactly. My staff and I are always honest, open and listening. Listening to someone is an essential behavior when demonstrating respect and earning their respect. Even when it’s really difficult hearing what a parent has to say. Staff listen to family member concerns and wishes and report it to leadership. We’re open to their feedback; we use their insight to inform our programmatic decisions. And, we’re honest and do what we say we will, thereby building trust between ourselves and our program families.
- H:** In addition to the two existing sites, I understand you opened an additional site this past school year. How easy was it to develop an organizational culture versus revise an existing one?
- G:** Relationship building is much stronger at the new site. In some ways it’s easier starting from scratch and building what you want. All of our policies and procedures had already been tried and vetted at the other sites and this meant we weren’t spending as much time revising. We worked together to create a program that fit the needs of the new site. That is not to say that my original staff aren’t doing an excellent job, but people can be creatures of habit.
- H:** Routines can be hard to break.
- G:** We’ve made some good progress, but we can always improve. To push the improvement along a bit faster, I’ve started having staff members from older sites visit the new site. It’s one thing for me to describe the climate at the new site, but it’s quite another thing for staff to experience the difference themselves. The culture between the new and older sites is slightly different and you can sense that. Again, talking or telling someone about the climate is very different than that person feeling it themselves as they walk through a building and talk with other staff and students.
- H:** Guiding staff through this process of articulating the organizational culture, really dissecting expectations to ensure they have clear and actionable steps is another example of you leading from behind.
- G:** Yes! When your staff independently conclude that a change or tweak is needed, they are much more likely to own that change. While I can repeatedly say we can do something

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Podcast Script – Leading Your Organization’s Culture and Climate

better or do a better job at something, staff may not initially agree or understand why. It’s important to take time with them so they fully understand the change. If we’re not all on the same page, we won’t have a positive culture. The climate of the building will feel negative and disjointed. Having staff go and view the practices in real-time not only demonstrates that the change is feasible, but also shows them exactly how to do it. It also allows staff to see the positive impact we can have on students because of a change. This is what it really means to live out our values and mission.

- H:** It sounds like a wonderful guiding principle to follow.
- G:** We’re working at it, and overall, I feel we’re succeeding.
- H:** Thank you very much for spending time with the U.S. Department of Education’s Y4Y Team today. We very much appreciate hearing your experience and listening to how you continuously model the behaviors necessary for living out your organization’s core values thereby building a positive organizational culture and climate.
- G:** Thank you.
- H:** Now that you’ve learned more about how Mary has led a team to success through building culture and climate and encouraging her staff to do the same, consider how you can apply these lessons to your own program. How will you as a leader model actions required to establish a positive organizational culture? Matching your leadership style to the core values of your organization goes a long way in establishing and maintaining a positive organizational culture. Are all staff knowledgeable of your vision, mission and core values? Are they able to explain what actions or behaviors are necessary to establish the desired climate? Use the resources in this Click and Go to create climate statements and help your staff actively contribute to your culture and climate.