

# Relationships drive learning, change, behaviour and results

*Ken Avenell*



*What is essential is invisible to the eye*  
De Saint-Exupéry – *The Little Prince*

**W**hether it is in classrooms, schools or systems; organisations are driven by relationships – people matter! Many schools and classrooms claim to be values-driven and publish their values and make them explicit in documents, plans and various marketing messages. Sadly, this does not mean, however, that the professed values guide daily decision-making and predicate personal behaviours.

Sometimes, people of significance do not model the values themselves, and then these leaders or teachers lack credibility and the empty values statements create cynical staff and wary students.

Lived values can set a work place or learning place apart from others through clarifying identity and purpose, and this serves as a presence point for staff. But having strong values

and sticking to them, requires real tenacity and moral courage, especially in difficult times. Any captain can sail a ship in calm waters but change creates rough seas and strong currents.

The turbulence of change is the composite effect of each individual doing something differently and thus creating 'organisational' change. New expectations go with new behaviours, yet to have lasting change in behaviours we need the safety and affirmation of: positive feedback; failing forward; serious balanced discussions of issues; laughter and celebrations (Eikenberry, 2016).

Culture is simply the product of consistent behaviour (Fried and Hansson, 2010). Climate is the significant outcome of how new behaviours are asked of us, and in schools it is leadership behaviour and in classrooms it is teacher behaviour, that shapes outcomes most. The observed behaviour of significant people is the single most influential determinant of organisational climate or 'how people behave

around here' – relationships.

We know when a culture is bad. There are clear behaviours when a lack of leadership results in: silence; cynicism; gossip and surprises (Eikenberry, 2016). Those things don't happen much in places in which it is great to work or learn. Great places rely on relationships, not just rules and structures. They assume they can trust people. They also know that any change event generates a lot of feeling and emotions on both sides of the continuum. They know that these experiences have a genuine effect on how people conduct their work (Ledema and Grant, 2013).

In *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943) we are reminded of the dangers of narrow-mindedness and that relationships teach responsibility. We cannot be in the company of others without some effect and if we truly are "nothing more than the sum of our memories and experiences" (Scott, 2009) then as teachers we must take responsibility for those interactions because we shape the lives of those we teach.

Our ability to lead people and manage processes are essential skills of today's leaders and leaders of the future. High performing leaders and teams have a higher rate of inquiry versus advocacy than lower performing people. They also listen attentively and intently. This is partly because of the need to be informed and partly because it shows respect and builds trust in our relationships (Warren, 2016). We see these behaviours in the best of our teachers.

Research on the brain shows that change resistance manifests itself not only a psychological reaction but also as physiological rewiring (Rock and Schwartz, 2006). To behave differently requires more power from the brain, and in the interest of preservation of energy, when presented with a new way of doing something, the brain's preference is to revert to what the brain already knows how to do. Human beings can adapt their behaviour, but it is a difficult and painful process – even for the brain itself.

While our 'moral imperative' is to enhance the learning of students, the key to success is to generate the very conditions that make intrinsic motivation flourish and the effort worthwhile (Fullan, 2011). Feedback of any sort, whether from teacher to student or school leader to teacher, only works when it is embedded in a culture that is supportive of mistakes as opportunities to learn and modify behaviours and strategies. People will not expend energy where it won't be returned.

Lawson and Price (2003) remind us that rather than a complex series of steps, change that gets results is really about changing mind-sets and needs only four conditions:

A purpose to believe in – if people believe in the overall purpose, they will be happy to change their individual behaviour to serve that purpose

Alignment of processes – if things are to change then the new things being asked must be consistent for all people and not just some

The skills required for change – don't make the mistake of requiring different behaviour without teaching what the new behaviour looks like and the skills needed to put it in place

Consistent role models – in any place people model their behaviour on 'significant others': those they see in positions of influence. To change behaviour consistently throughout an organisation or classroom, it isn't enough to ensure that people at the top are in line with the new ways of working; role models at every level must "walk the talk."

Education isn't easy. In fact, it is probably one of the most complex, challenging things we do in our society, especially given the growing diversity of our student body and the greater amounts of information and concepts students are expected to know. We also know that things will not stay constant for ourselves or our students and that we will all learn and unlearn our way into the future.

How successful we are, depends on how we are treated and how we in turn, treat others. Successful organisations, successful schools, and successful classrooms are driven by relationships where people are seen to matter.

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