

# Culture and Communication Plan



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## Culture and Communication Plan

### Culture and Communication Plan for Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran School

For nearly fifty years, Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran School (COR) has carried out the Lord's Great Commission to teach and preach the saving gospel message. Things have certainly changed over fifty years, but what has not changed is the commitment to preparing students for this life and the next through scripturally-sound spiritual training and a high-quality academic program. Pursuing excellence is an ongoing task that requires the time, talents, and treasures of everyone involved in the school community. One key factor in how well a school performs is its culture. "Cultural patterns are highly enduring, have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the ways people think, act, and feel. Everything, and we do mean everything, in the organization is affected by the culture and its particular form and features" (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 7). The following essay outlines a plan to improve COR's culture through diagnosing the current culture, strengthening positive cultural aspects, eliminating/replacing negative cultural elements, and promoting positive communication throughout the school community.

#### **What is the culture of the school now?**

##### **Method**

My approach to diagnosing the culture of Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran School (COR) was to follow Kruse and Seashore Louis' (2009) wet, wash, and rinse method. To complete the wet stage I used the diagnostic tools found at the end of each chapter of Kruse and Seashore Louis' (2009) *Building Strong School Cultures*. The use of their questions and diagnosis tools provided me with an opportunity to take an honest look at our school's culture through an unbiased lens.

The purpose of the wash phase was to get other stakeholders involved in diagnosing COR's culture. I did this through a survey that included two main parts. One was the use of five questions that were "designed to help you work through the discovery phase of the appreciative inquiry process" (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009, p. 70). This is only the beginning of the appreciative inquiry (AI) process that I plan to continue throughout the upcoming school year. The other part of the survey was an adapted form of one of the tools developed by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). I used the questions from NSDC's (2008) "School Culture Survey" (p. 98). It asked stakeholders to rank both the importance and presence of thirteen "key indicators of a school's culture" (NSDC, 2008, p. 98). To avoid bias, I kept a majority of the original wording as I developed my survey. Together, the AI

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questions and the NSDC (2008) survey questions gave faculty, staff, parents, and congregation members a chance to provide written feedback and statistical data from their perspective.

The rinse phase includes inviting others to look at the data collected from the wash phase and collectively diagnosing the organizations culture. This stage will take place throughout the upcoming school year. Plans are in the works with COR's board of education to plan open-forum meetings during the school year so that a variety of people can discuss the survey work done for this project. I also plan on making this a point of emphasis in our faculty meetings throughout the year.

### **Diagnosis**

In summary, I found COR's culture to be based around the concept of the organization being a Christian family. This foundational concept became clear in the survey results in a few different ways.

A Christian atmosphere and a family feel are two enacted values of COR. Thirty-three people from the organization responded to the survey. In response to the five open-ended questions regarding what people are proud of, what serves stakeholders well, and what makes the school unique, sixty-four of the one hundred fifty-two responses mentioned the Christian focus and family atmosphere of the organization. The rankings of how present a sense of community, family, or team are at COR varied greatly. Clearly, a Christian atmosphere and a family feel are agreed upon values that stakeholders want, but not everyone feels like they are part of that family in a meaningful way. This needs to be a focus of conversations heading into the next school year so that people feel like they are a part of a Christian family more consistently.

Another aspect of COR being a Christian family is the connection between the school and congregation. Within our organization, we have congregation members that don't have children at the school, congregation members who do have students in the school, and school families that don't belong to the church. Some of what brings those three groups together is the tradition of worshipping together throughout the year. Survey answers to the five open-ended questions suggest that opening/closing services, Christmas programs, and worship services in which school kids participate add to the sense of Christian community that is valued by many in the organization.

Another truth that I learned through self-reflection and the survey results is one that Deal and Peterson (2009) convey well when they wrote, "The past is closer to us than it often seems to be. It affects us more than we think" (p. 45). When taking over for someone who led the school for more than thirty years, change is inevitable. Some have welcomed the change and others would prefer if things stayed the way they were. Because of this, the

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survey results suggest that our community is currently splintered to a certain extent. This is evident in the wide variety of both positive and negative rankings and comments concerning past and present leadership. It will be important for me going forward to continue to be a student of COR's culture so that I can be an agent of positive change that unites the Christian community rather than divides it.

Deal and Peterson (2009) highlight the importance of stories within an organization that positively communicate and preserve culture much the way families reminisce at gatherings. It is not something I had thought much about, but after reading the Deal and Peterson's (2009) perspective on stories, I tried to be aware of stories that were being told, I purposefully included open-ended questions and comment boxes in the survey hoping to draw out some stories. The results of this work revealed a lack of stories. I see the need for me to actively draw out stories from the past and to tell stories from my experience to enhance the Christian family atmosphere.

I learned much about COR's culture through this study and hope to be an agent of change that helps people realize that there are negatives and positives to COR's culture and leads the Christian family to continuously make positive changes while celebrating its rich history.

### **School Cultural Vision**

The vision I have for COR's culture is one modeled after the culture of the early Christian church family of believers. As mentioned in the diagnosis above, a Christian family atmosphere is what members of our school community see as ideal. Achieving and maintaining this type of culture is difficult because it involves a group of sinners selflessly committing themselves to their Lord and to each other through the good times and the bad. Elements of this culture exist at COR and need to be strengthened, while other aspects could use some improvement. It is realistic to expect that after two to three years of cultural development, that all members of the school community would claim that COR has a strong Christian family atmosphere if a similar survey to then one used in the diagnosis were given three years from now. Acts 2:42-47 gives us a glimpse into how the family of believers organized themselves and conducted their affairs. We may be tempted to make excuses when reading about the family of believers in Acts claiming that times have changed and that type of fellowship is no longer realistic. That thinking is nothing short of an excuse, because modern school culture experts emphasize the need for many of the same cultural elements that were present in the early church.

Acts 2:44 emphasizes learning as a key component in the early Christian church, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (New International Version). Ongoing learning is necessary to build and maintain a

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healthy school culture. Kruse and Seashore Louis (2009) advocate learning through developing “Professional Community, Organizational Learning, and Trust (PCOLT)” (p. 8). Professional community urges principals and teachers to develop a strong working relationship focused on student learning where constant learning is taking place through evaluating what is working and not working, and through taking advantage of professional development opportunities. Organizational learning brings together the entire school community and encourages everyone to look for ways to develop positive school culture focused on student learning. “Trust is the glue that holds social networks and relationships together” (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009, p. 9). As members of the community work together to fulfill a common vision and achieve organizational goals, trust develops and further enhances the school’s culture.

Acts 2:42-43 also shares with us that the early church community spent time on “fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer” (New International Version). The family of believers came together because of their commonly held beliefs, and these rituals brought them closer together through common experiences. Commonly held beliefs are just as important in our school community. “Beliefs are powerful in schools because they represent core understandings about student capacity, teacher responsibility for learning, expert sources of teacher knowledge, collaboration, and the link between teaching and learning” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 66). Our beliefs at COR bind us even more tightly together than secular school communities because it is based on our faith and trust in Jesus as our Savior. Our love for Christ binds us together and motivates us to celebrate our faith through doing our best in our vocations and through joining together in fellowship opportunities with one another. Rituals such as chapel, worship services, meals, picnics, meetings, and field trips centered on Christ provide those opportunities. These moments spent together give us a chance to reflect on what’s really important, connect with one another, and feel the common spirit that “makes seeming routines less like assembly line work and more like spiritual communion” (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 91).

The last element of the Christian family found in Acts chapter two is that of true community. Acts 2:44-45 says, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (New International Version). Selling property is not the key, but rather the loving relationship the early believers had with each other. This type of relationship is developed through openly communicating our needs and ability to help those who are in need. “Understanding another empowers both you and the other person. You have opened yourself to “hear” truly and build a relationship” (Gilbert, 2012, p. 31). Christ

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love for us compels us to not just understand each other, but to truly obey the command to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” Philippians 2:3-4, New International Version).

### Action Plan with Timeline

Much of the Christian family culture that we desire at COR already exists. Yet, according to the results of the culture diagnosis, there is work that needs to be done to unify our organization around a common vision of what a Christian family atmosphere looks and feels like. The following chart outlines specific opportunities to improve our school culture through solidifying the positive aspects of our current school culture and by addressing some of the shortcomings that exist. Taking full advantage of these opportunities will lead to improved communication, more fellowship, more celebrations of what God is doing among us, and increased student learning. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. In fact, the more our organization learns about itself and the community around us, the better we will be able to generate ideas the boost or expand our positive school culture.

Category	Opportunity	Description	Timeline
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Back-To-School Night</li> <li>Opening Service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This will be the first gathering of the school year which makes it the perfect opportunity to focus on the mission of the school and the vision that we have for the school year. It will also bring together returning families and new families, so it is critical that positive conveyors of school culture interact with new families.</li> <li>Our Pastor will conduct the service. Families are encouraged to attend. Making worship the first official event of the school year shares the message that our purpose is to worship Christ in all we do.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Week Before School Begins</li> <li>First Day of School</li> </ul>
Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Hallways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have typically decorated the hallways with student work and bulletin boards that display Christian messages. I think we could be more purposeful with what we display to ensure the hallways are conveying the exact message that we want to send to all stakeholders that enter the building.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Throughout each school year</li> </ul>
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteers' Dinner or Picnic</li> <li>50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This has not been done at COR before, but it seems like it would be a great way to show gratitude to volunteers and to encourage a giving spirit. Stories can be shared from the year that reinforce the types of service that truly benefit the students.</li> <li>Fall of 2018 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran School. I think it would benefit our current and future school culture if our organization came together to celebrate the work that God has done through COR in the past.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annually in Spring</li> <li>Fall 2018</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent-Teacher Conferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conferences take place twice a year. Face-to-face meetings can build positive relationships between the school and families. It is also a great time to simply listen and pick up on clues as to how students and parents feel about the school and its culture. We are planning on changing how we schedule conferences this year. There has been some frustration about the scheduling and format in the past, so we are looking to make some positive changes based on parent feedback.</li> <li>Town hall meetings take place quarterly. A principal's report is a routine part of the meeting. It is a time to report positive happenings from the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarters</li> <li>Quarterly</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Town Hall Congregation Meetings</li> <li>Accreditation</li> </ul>	<p>year, share challenges openly and honestly, and to keep the vision for the school on the minds of stakeholders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seeking accreditation will be long process that involves a lot of work, but the benefits of the process will be well worth the effort. Accreditation requires many people from the school community to band together to accomplish something meaningful for the organization. It will force us to consider our mission and vision for the school. It will ensure that the quality of the educational program is at the level of excellence that we desire. When completed, the COR family will have will be more united in purpose and will gain confidence that we are doing our very best to serve the Lord, our congregation, and the community around us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fall 2017 – Fall 2019</li> </ul>
Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open-Forum Meetings &amp; Parent Action Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Our school board plans on hosting three open-forum meetings to dedicate solid amounts of time toward openly discussing aspects of the school and its culture. These differ from the congregational town hall meetings in length and purpose. Town hall meetings typically take place between services on Sundays are designed for reports and brief discussions. The open-forum meetings are discussion focused and have a longer time slot. These meetings and parent group focused on taking positive action to support the school are replacing a PTO group that attempted to be both a discussion and action group. Some frustrations existed because not enough was getting done and there were not enough opportunities for voices and opinions to be heard. The changes are intended to be proactive in giving people a chance to have their voices heard while not impeding the planning and carrying out of positive action items.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>September, January, and May</li> </ul>
Celebration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wednesday Chapel</li> <li>School Newsletter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We gather every Wednesday for chapel. Our pastor and I switch off leading the devotion. Parents are invited. We are trying to look for ways to get more parents to attend like providing snacks and refreshments, inviting them to participate in our buddy reading activity that follows chapel, or possibly a Bible study to follow.</li> <li>Our school newsletter goes out monthly. It has traditionally been announcement focused. As the principal, I need to do a better job of using this as a communication tool to celebrate what God is doing through the school. I need to be more of a poet by telling stories and highlighting student achievement. We are also planning on having our 6-8 graders participate in writing articles for the newsletter this year to generate even more positive stories.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every Wednesday</li> <li>Monthly</li> </ul>
Caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service Opportunities</li> <li>COR Family Time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are actively seeking more chances for our students to serve the community. Last year we had a food drive and had the 6-8 graders volunteer at a food shelter. We collect mission offerings each Wednesday at chapel. Students also performed their Christmas songs at a couple of retirement homes. I think we could do more encourage a giving spirit by increasing the service opportunities for our students.</li> <li>We are planning on calling Wednesday mornings COR Family Time. Each week we will gather for chapel and then have a buddy reading session where older students read with younger students. Parents and congregation members are also encouraged to participate in reading with the school children. Following buddy reading, we will do a group activity outside like relay races, kickball, or other activities in which all school community members can participate. A family culture seems to be important to many stakeholders, so we want to make that a distinguishing feature of our school week.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several times throughout the school year</li> <li>Every Wednesday</li> </ul>

### Communication

If this plan is going to have a positive and lasting influence on COR's climate and culture, it will need to be presented formally to our faculty/staff, the school board, and our church leaders group. I plan on making it available

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to the congregation and school families resource section of our website that is intended for current families. After people have had a chance to review the proposed plan, formal and informal opportunities will be given to stakeholders to share their thoughts and reactions to it. An open-forum meeting will take place within the first two months of school to discuss school culture. I also plan on having discussions about the plan in faculty meetings, especially at the beginning of the year. If there is consensus on the plan, then the school board, faculty, and I will have primary responsibility for implementing the plan and encouraging all members of the organization to get involved in meaningful ways. It will be crucial throughout this process that collective efficacy is built through a persistent message of “Together we have the capacity to do this” (Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010, p. 15).

### **Assessment**

A key component of cultural improvement efforts is being able to assess what is working for us and what is working against us. Culture is not easily measured because “a school’s culture is like an iceberg, where most of what is important is submerged...Most of a school’s culture lies below what can be easily seen...” (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009, p. 47). Because of this, multiple assessments of an organization’s culture are necessary. At COR, some of the meetings mentioned in the action plan will provide time for formal conversations regarding culture and things that influence our culture. Informal conversations take place daily. As the school leader, I need to be aware of the tone of conversations, I need to truly listen to what others are telling me, and I need to pick up on the vibes that are given as people interact in the building. Each member of the COR family is also responsible for being aware of how the school is talked about in conversations and to do their best to positively influence conversations regarding the school. I would also recommend that we use the same survey or a very similar survey twice a year over the next three years to measure progress as we seek to build a positive school climate.



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