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# Building a Positive School Culture

March 11, 2013

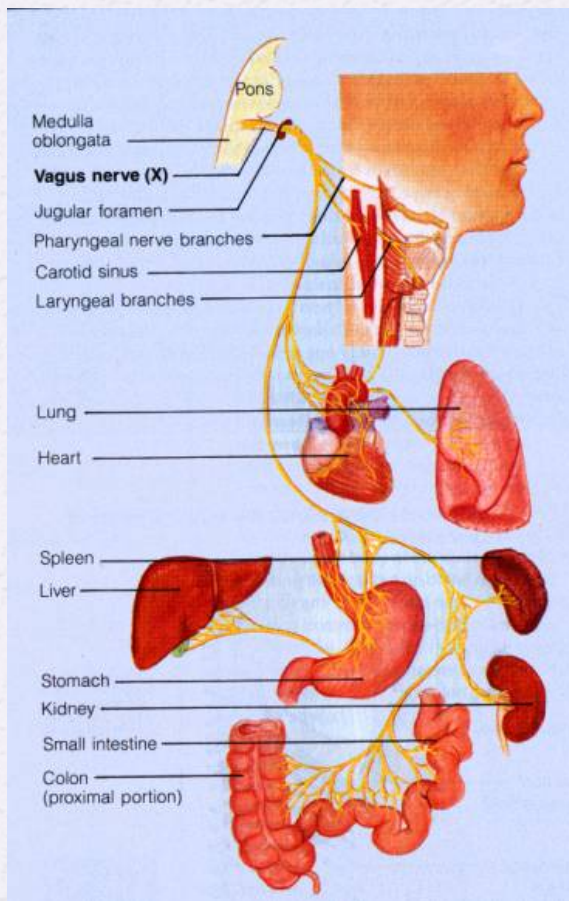
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# The Vagus Nerve

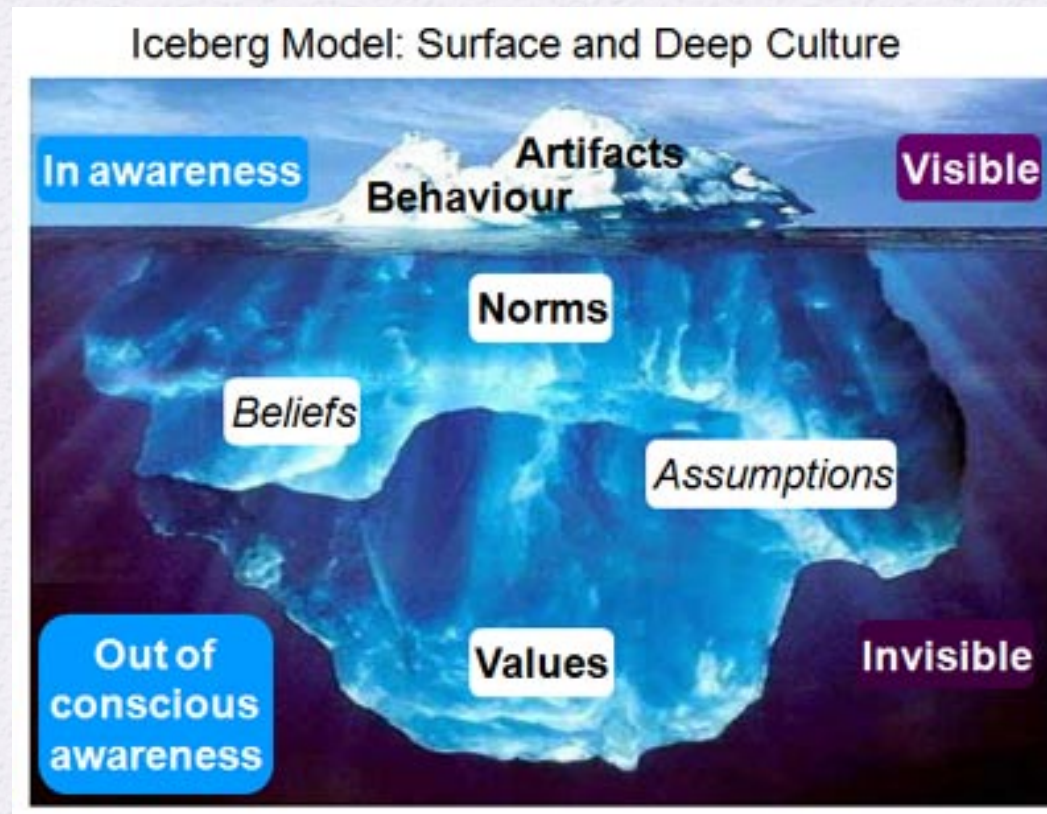


- Helps coordinate the interaction between your breathing and heart rate.
- Vagal superstars:
  - More positive emotions
  - Stronger relationships
  - Fifth graders who have a stronger vagal profile are the kids who intervene when a kid is being bullied.

To activate:

- Breathe in for a count of 3 and breathe out for a count of 6

# What is Organizational Culture?



# Why is a “positive” school culture important?

## Students:

- Stronger school connectedness (“I matter to someone at school”)
- Stronger academic motivation
- More concern for others
- Less engagement in risk-behaviors

## Teachers:

- Greater retention
- Less burn-out
- Increased productivity
- More open to innovation & change
- Stronger relationships with students & colleagues (Source: Developmental Studies Center)

## Administrators:

- Greater authenticity
- Less burn-out



High Quality  
Relationships

Autonomy

Positive  
School  
Culture

Shared  
Vision

Meaningful  
Work

## High Quality Relationships



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### Psychological Safety:

The ability to express oneself without fear of negative consequences



# Test for Psychological Safety

Scale of 1 to 6: 1= never, 6=always

1. Staff members are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
2. Working with staff members, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.
3. If a staff member makes a mistake, it is not held against him or her.
4. It is safe to take a risk at this school.
5. It is safe to ask for help at this school.
6. No one at this school would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts. (Edmondson, 1999)



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## High Quality Relationships



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Emotional Carrying Capacity:  
The ability to express positive and negative emotions and deal with them constructively



# Test for Emotional Carrying Capacity

Scale of 1 to 6: 1= never, 6=always



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1. The school staff has no problem expressing their feelings towards each other.
2. When a staff member expresses uncomfortable feelings, she or he always does it in a constructive way.
3. Staff members are not afraid to express both good and bad feelings at work.
4. I can fully express my emotions to my Interaction Partner.
5. When we interact with each other, we express both positive and negative feelings to each other.
6. When I talk about my emotions with my Interaction Partner, I feel like it is constructive. (Stephens et al., 2013)

# So how do you get there?



# Empathy & Compassion

# Definitions



**Empathy:** the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

**Compassion:** the feeling that arises when you witness another's suffering and want to help.



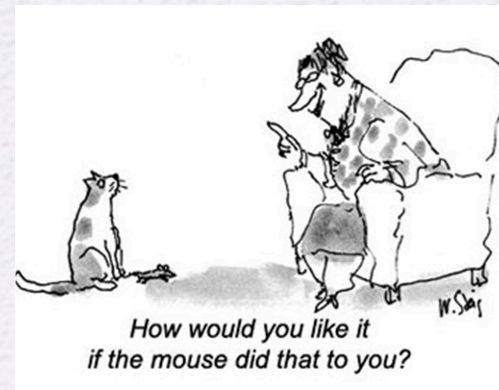
# Empathy & Compassion Inhibitors

1. Lack of resources
2. Don't feel safe
3. Lack of time
4. Not deserving of help
5. Lack of identification with other person
6. Power imbalance
7. Emotion overload – the myth of “compassion fatigue”



# Cultivating Empathy & Compassion

- Actively imagine how another person feels.



"Could a greater miracle take place  
than for us to look through each other's eyes  
for an instant?"

— Henry David Thoreau

- Don't jump to conclusions about others [Empathy Video](#)

- Meditation, especially loving-kindness meditation



# More Empathy & Compassion Cultivators

4. Mindfulness – What’s the meaning of this feeling?



5. Self-compassion



6. Savor moments of compassion



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A compassionate leader develops an eye for spotting the qualities that make each person special. Even when others are at their lowest ebb, it is possible to help them restore their self-belief by keeping a firm, clear vision of their goodness and specialties. Taking a gently encouraging approach, I must never give up on anyone.

- Unknown Author

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