



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Exemplify Positive Attitudes and Mutual Respect

**Positive emotions such as compassion, confidence, and generosity have a decidedly constructive effect on neurological functioning, psychological well-being, physical health, and personal relationships.**

—Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee

Civil school cultures are those in which community members think the best of one another, display positive attitudes, speak with kindness, respect others' opinions, and disagree graciously while candidly expressing their views. Those qualities are unlikely to exist and persist without school leaders who embody them in their day-to-day interactions with staff members, parents, and students.

In *The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude*, P. M. Forni writes, "Whether positive or negative, attitude is destiny. . . . Positivity makes relationships better, and better relationships reinforce positivity. So, if you are inclined to perceive what happens to you through the fog of negativity, make a change of attitude your number one priority." Changing habits of mind and behavior, however, requires that leaders be intentional and persistent in approaching these changes, beginning with themselves. These leaders can:

- Hold positive expectations for others by setting high standards for conduct and learning and by living those standards on a day-to-day basis. And when leaders

stumble, as they sometimes do, they can acknowledge the lapse and set about resolving whatever problems their lapse may have caused.

- Display a generosity of spirit that assumes others are honest, trustworthy, and capable unless there is abundant evidence to the contrary. Assuming the best is a key attribute of hopefulness, which, in turn, is a critical attribute of relationships that nurture and support continuous improvement. (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 2](#).)
- Speak with compassion and kindness, which Forni believes is at the heart of civil behavior. In *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, he writes, "Never embarrass or mortify. . . . Always think before speaking. . . . With your kind words you build a shelter of sanity and trust into which you welcome others for much-needed respite."
- Speak truthfully. Civility recognizes that people look at the world differently and are entitled to a fair hearing of their views. Civil school cultures are places in which ideas and beliefs are vigorously and respectfully expressed in meeting rooms. Sarcasm, disparaging gossip, and "parking lot meetings" have no place in such cultures.

Leaders who develop positive attitudes and deep respect for the abilities and perspectives of others, and who speak with and about others in that spirit, lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

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