

## Cultural DNA

### Obsess Over Families

While we pay attention to feedback, Kairos is not a fundamentally reactive organization. Instead, we are proactively oriented toward building new, better, and progressive ways to empower and delight our families. We're trying to invent the experience our students and parents don't even know they want yet.

Backwards planning from our family experience—as opposed to designing around our existing model (product obsession), assumptions about how we provide value to students (business model obsession), or what other schools are doing (competitor obsession)—lets us tightly align around a shared mission anchored in faculty and staff autonomy. Any decision will be supported that makes our family experience more enjoyable (increasing student learning, strengthening parent partnerships, etc.). That's why we seek to deeply understand that experience, even going so far as moving into the community we serve. Our team is building the school that we want to send our own children to.

### Details Matter

Do you know the joy when something *just* works? Everything at Kairos should be like that: clever, gorgeous, and easy to use. That's because everything you build here, whether shared internally or externally, reflects on our community—not just our students, but the vanguard of education reform. Don't submit work with solecisms, ugly formatting, or bugs; fix those, and make sure they stay fixed. Many people may think our standards are unreasonably high. Those people can find somewhere else to work.

### You Are Kairos

There are schools where people leave litter for someone else to pick up, and there are schools that people treat like their home. The difference is a sense of ownership. In your own house, you probably have a bedroom that's truly yours, but if there were trash in the living room, you'd pick that up too. It just wouldn't make sense to say "that's not my responsibility."

Of course, at home you can take responsibility because you're empowered to make decisions. That should be true at Kairos too. The role of your manager is not to control your work, but to contextualize it so that, on your own, you can make the best decisions possible given our

organizational priorities, resources, and constraints.

Don't seek to please your manager. Seek to build a future of self-directed learners, leaders, and citizens. Even when we disagree, we're all on the same team. When our kids win, we all win.

## Don't Be A Jerk

It's a myth that geniuses must be socially inept. You can be eccentric here. You can ignore staid "professionalism" here. You can even tell someone their idea is dumb here. (In fact, you should; it takes lots of dumb ideas to get to a good one.) The one thing you can't be here is mean spirited.

In a lot of schools, staff think about teachers and administrators as "us vs them." That adversarial mindset is toxic, and we have no patience for it. Relationships are our community's most important asset. We don't all have to be friends, but we all have to work together as colleagues. When there's damage to a relationship—either student-student, student-staff, or staff-staff—we facilitate "relationship work" to restore collegiality.

So if you're upset about something, don't bottle it up. Candor and clarity are acts of kindness. If a teammate was a jerk, request relationship work. If a teammate made a bad decision, tell them that you feel compelled to bring it to your manager. As long as you're oriented toward solutions, it's always helpful to air out problems.

## Have a (Thoughtful) Opinion

Operating by consensus slows us down, but so does having to override bad decisions. We balance decision velocity with decision wisdom by soliciting input.

Decision-makers should hear from colleagues with either a valuable perspective or a stake in the outcome. Since everyone's input informs the quality of the decision, it's your job to...

- stay abreast on news, both within and without Kairos, pertaining to your role and team
- seek information to undermine or disconfirm your opinions and beliefs
- defend why your proposal is best for Kairos, not just for your team or yourself
- identify how important the decision is to you: strong preference, mild preference, indifferent
- disagree when you think a colleague is wrong, including your manager
- not take disagreements personally or let emotions overwhelm the discussion

- disagree without being disagreeable
- debate to discover the right answer, not to win
- change your mind frequently in light of new data or further thought

Input is best collected in meetings, but thinking is best done beforehand. That's why agendas are set 24 hours in advance. Preparation is key. Meetings are used for clarifying questions, opinion sharing, and responses to opinions. Stay concise and keep discussion to the decision at hand. Don't blivate on extraneous topics or future decisions.

Speed matters. Reversible decisions that do not require significant upfront investment do not need extensive study. When you're about 70% confident, make a call. Small decisions may be shared in a quick email; larger ones merit a memo or meeting outlining the various positions. We expect everyone, including those who still disagree, to commit to helping make the decision as successful as possible. A manager might write "disagree and commit" at the end of an email disagreeing with a proposed decision to say, in effect, "here's my opinion, for what it's worth; no need to waste time persuading me; I'm committing to support you either way."

## Think Big; Experiment Small

Thinking small is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Experimenting big is risky and wasteful. This conundrum often tends to drive organizations to safety, where they avoid challenging conventions, or to overextension, where they fail to protect their promises.

### Symptoms of safety include:

- Managers involved in small decisions; bias for inaction
- Lots of cross-departmental buy-in meetings to socialize tactics
- Decisions that please colleagues instead of pleasing families

### Symptoms of overextension include:

- Big, often irreversible bets based on anecdotal data
- Spending big in flush times because "we can"
- Communication that hides muddy thinking or weak results, e.g.,
  - trite metaphors ("standing shoulder to shoulder with")
  - jargon ("synergy" or "optics"), often non-Saxon in origin, and dreaded subspecies,

- such as the faddish ed reform buzzword ○ phrases instead of verbs (“exhibit a tendency to” vs. “tend to”)
- passive voice (“the decision was made to” vs. “I decided”)
- noun constructions instead of gerunds (“by examination of” vs. “by examining”)
- meaningless words or passages (the majority of so-called contemporary academic research)

You need big thinking to transform an industry that’s failed for centuries. But to continue innovating without jeopardizing continuity, you need small experiments. That’s why we’re always prototyping multiple ideas in parallel. Our goal is not error avoidance; it’s long-term value maximization. The value of a bold idea, when scaled, far outweighs many, many failures, as long as those failed experiments are contained (as measured by resources spent and students affected). The faster we strategically experiment, the faster we learn, the faster Kairos improves.

One final note: Experiments get you data, and without data, much of your effort will likely be worthless. That’s why you should always try to commit the fewest resources possible to your experiment without sacrificing long-term value. It’s very hard to predict black swan events, how plans will unfold, preferred use cases, and future priorities. If you invest a lot up front, there’s a good chance much of that investment will be wasted. Instead, it’s a good idea to make a minimum viable product (MVP), then let organizational needs drive the roadmap for development. This is true for plans, tools, or decisions. Do the least you can do in order to learn from an experiment, then “punt” until you have more data. If the data confirm your theory, you can expand the commitment later. If they disconfirm your theory, you minimized waste.

## **Do More With Less**

Kairos began as a couple of frustrated teachers meeting in their kitchen to dream up what public education could and should be. We pinched pennies and worked side jobs to make ends meet. But resource constraint is the mother of resourcefulness, and we picked up a few questions to help us stay scrappy.

- Need: Do we actually need this, or are you just filling your budget, time, or role self-conception? How does this purchase, process, or tool fit into the team and school’s overall priorities?
- Value: Can we get it cheaper? Can we get more of it? Can we get it at a higher quality?

- Efficiency: Can we reduce the number, frequency, or time required for steps in this process? Can we eliminate bottlenecks that might slow down a teammate's workflow? Can we use technology to automate or streamline steps?
- Locus: Is this a repetitive task whose output varies predictably? Centralize ownership to minimize cost to human resources and ensure consistency. Otherwise, decentralize as much as possible by giving teammates the information and tools to complete the task autonomously. Oversight should be directly proportional to the output's impact and inversely proportional to its reversibility.
- Simplicity: How easy is this for others to understand and use? Confusion and uptake time are real costs. The more complicated, the more likely it will break, either due to bugs or user error.

Transforming public education is a tall order, so every minute and dollar count. There are no bonus points for growing headcount, budget, or complexity. War against entropy.

Finally, no amount of resourcefulness beats opportunism. Share our mission to rally allies to the cause. Every ally brings a resource: a word-of-mouth recommendation, connection, discount, donation, pro bono service, in-kind gift, volunteer hours, etc. Be opportunistic and capture those resources. They help our team stay frugal and self-sufficient.

## **Be Better**

We may raise the bar for public schools in St. Louis, but we're terrible compared to how good we plan to become. Everyone at Kairos, from students to faculty to the board, is focused on iterative, incremental high-leverage growth (lowest lift, largest impact). That's why our year is structured into build-measure-learn cycles. We don't measure intentions; we measure results, and we benchmark ourselves against the best. You should be self-critical and relentless in your pursuit of excellence.

## **Figure It Out**

We're trying to do something no one's ever done, so we spend a lot of time figuring things out. Don't know how to do something? Google, read, figure it out. Found something that can help our kids? Steal it. (In this section alone, we've stolen from Netflix, Amazon, and The West Wing.) At Kairos, we don't depend on our managers or external training for professional growth; we each figure out how to grow ourselves so that we can all better serve kids.

P.S. Learn Google Sheets. "Proficient" is just the beginning.

## Welcome to the NBA

Students are our family. We love and support them unconditionally, no matter their behavior or performance. Colleagues are our team. Sometimes teammates are let go, and while that's disappointing, being on a dream team can be the professional thrill of a lifetime. In sports, it's up to the coach to make sure each teammate is extraordinary at what they do. The coach pushes everyone on the team to be their best, help their teammates, and prioritize the team's victory over any individual's success.

Concretely, here are some of the questions our coaches (i.e., managers) ask when hiring, promoting, and firing.

- Median Question: Is this person stronger than our median employee? On the margin, do they make us better or worse?
- Boss Question: If the roles were reversed, would I be happy working for this person?
- Keeper Question: If this person were thinking of leaving, how hard would I fight to keep them?

We expect teammates to work both smarter and harder, but above all, we expect them to navigate by this constellation of values. You may be brilliant, but if your orientation pulls Kairos off path, then you're undermining why we organize our efforts into an organization—to accomplish something together that we couldn't as uncoordinated individuals. One drop of poison infects the whole tun.

The kids are why we educate, but the team is what makes it fun. There's something extremely appealing about extreme competence. That's why we promptly let go of folks who aren't a joy to work with. What you get is a chance to shape the future of public education alongside colleagues who inspire you to be your best each and every day.