Rethinking Our Thinking on Discipline
Empower—Rather than Overpower

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We need to rethink our thinking about discipline.
We cannot change other people,
but we can empower them to change themselves.

Peter Drucker, the country's dean of business management, said that people fail because of what they won't give up. We cling to what has always worked—even after it has clearly stopped working. We are clinging to a way of managing students that no longer works with far too many young people. Society and the nature of youth have changed, but we still think external controls are the way to change people.

External Controls

After a seminar in Washington, D.C., I received a letter from one of the participants who told me this story.

> My eleven-year-old daughter had done something TERRIFIC and I launched into my usual, "Oh, Honey, Mommy's so PROUD of you. . . ." Well, she stopped me mid-gush, put her hand on her hips and implored, "Mom, PLEASE STOP! Whenever you do that, you make me feel like you're surprised that I can do things—like I'm not capable!"

The mother was using praise in an attempt to reward her daughter. Although the mother's intentions were honorable, they were counterproductive. The mother has since started to *acknowledge* her daughter's actions without reference to her own motherly pride. Acknowledgments refrain from implying the action was taken to please someone else. *Acknowledgments, recognition, and validation are more satisfying rewards.*

Incentives also serve as rewards. Grades are incentives for many students. However, schools have great numbers of students who are not motivated by such incentives. The point is important: *Rewards can serve as effective incentives only if the person is interested in that reward.*

Although rewards such as acknowledgments and incentives can have salutary effects, *rewards for expected standards of behavior are counterproductive.* Can you recall when you were given a reward for stopping at a red light? Society does not give rewards for expected standards of behavior. But schools are giving young people the message that society will reward them if they act appropriately.

An interviewer once related the following to me after a discussion of how society and youth have changed in recent generations:

> The other day, my teenage daughter was eating in a rather slovenly manner, and I *lightly* tapped her on the wrist and said, "Don't eat that way."

> My daughter replied, "Don't abuse me."

The mother had grown up in the 1960s and volunteered the point that her generation tested authority but really was afraid to step out of bounds. She related that her daughter was a good child and added, "*But these kids not only disrespect authority, they have no fear of it.*"

When students are not afraid, punishment loses its efficacy. Yet, we often resort to punishment as a strategy for motivation. For example, students who are assigned detention and who fail to show are punished with more detention. But in the hundreds of seminars I have conducted around the country, teachers who use detention rarely suggest that it is effective in changing behavior.

The National PTA, in fact, discourages the use of punishment:

> To many people, discipline means punishment. But, actually, *to discipline means to teach.* Rather than punishment, discipline should be a positive way of helping and guiding children to achieve self-control. (*Discipline: A Parents' Guide.* National PTA, 1993)

Pervasive discipline approaches in this country use rewards and/or punishments to influence classroom behavior. At the same time, teachers cite discipline problems as the main reason for leaving the profession. If a teacher quits, it's because the discipline has just gotten so bad it's hard to handle. In my home state of California, fifty percent of entering teachers leave the profession within five years. A recent *Educational Leadership* article referred to this situation as "The Profession That Eats Its Young." (Halford, February, 1998, p. 33) We need not look much further than the dropout rate of teachers related to the distress of discipline problems to question the effectiveness of external controls.

Even though some battles may be won with this approach, inevitably the war is lost. Punishments in particular are temporary and transitory. Once the punishment is over, the student has "served his time" and is "free and clear" from further responsibility. An inquiry into how rewards and punishments affect behavior *when no one is looking* reinforces the point.

External controls are manipulators that set up students to be dependent upon external agents. They do not foster long-term intrinsic motivation or social responsibility. Indeed, a major problem with these external attempts to control is that they teach obedience without fostering responsibility. *Teaching obedience is not enough. The ultimate goal is that young people act responsibly because it pays off for them—rather than to please someone else.*

When young people grow into adolescence, the inadequacy of external attempts to change behavior begins to blossom. Just ask the parent of any teenager.

In his book, *Choice Theory - A New Psychology of Personal Freedom,* William Glasser calls this type of thinking "external control psychology." (Glasser, 1998, p. 5) This psychology is based on the idea that one person can change another person. Think of any person with whom you have had a long association—spouse, child, parent, fellow worker—and reflect upon whether *you* changed that person. And if the person did change, reflect upon whether *you* did the changing or if the person changed him/herself.

People are not changed by other people. You may coerce someone into temporary compliance, but change comes from internal motivation. In all human relations and in fostering social responsibility with young people, lasting changes comes from within, not from without. With this thinking in mind, we can make real progress.

Internal Motivation

W. Edwards Deming, the world's leader of quality in the workplace, understood that you cannot legislate or dictate intrinsic motivation (desire), performance, productivity, or quality work. He believed that all human beings are born with intrinsic motivation—an inner drive to learn, to take pride in their work, to experiment, and to improve.

Stephen Covey said, "In all my experiences, I have never seen lasting solutions to problems, lasting happiness and success, that came from the outside in." (*7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1990, p. 43)

Here are some examples of how this approach is applied in classrooms. The internal-control principle follows each question.

- The student sitting next to you hits you. You hit him back. Who caused your behavior?
  A. The other student.
  B. Yourself.
  People choose their own behaviors.

- You walk into your math classroom. The sponge activity is to do ten (10) problems.
  Which would your prefer?
  A. Do the 10 problems on the board.
  B. Your choice: Do the 10 problems on the board or the 10 problems on page 12.
  Choice empowers.

- You disrupt the class. Which would have greater, lasting impact?
  A. The teacher tells you what you did was wrong.
  B. You realize what you did was wrong—without the teacher's saying anything.
  Self-evaluation is essential for lasting improvement.

- You throw a wad of paper across the room. The teacher sees it leave your hand.
  Which would be more successful for controlling yourself in the future?
  A. The teacher tells you to pick it up.
  B. The teacher doesn't say anything—and you pick it up.
  Self-correction is the most successful approach for changing behavior.

- You walk into a classroom and notice the wastepaper basket on its side. Which would give
  you more satisfaction?
  A. Having the teacher suggest you turn it upright.
  B. Turning it upright without the teacher's saying anything.
  Acting responsibly is more satisfying through intrinsic motivation.

- You enjoy one of the learning centers in the classroom and would like to go to it.
  Which would you rather hear?
  A. No, you can't go to the center until your assignment is completed.
  B. Of course you can go to the center—as soon as your assignment is completed.
  Positivity is a more contructive teacher than negativity.

- You have disrupted the classroom again. Which would have the greater effect in
  changing your future behavior?
  A. The teacher says, "You will serve detention tomorrow afternoon."
  B. The teacher says, "Complete this self-referral with your learning buddy."
  Growth is greater when authority is used without punishment.

<u>Choice</u>

Choice is the main vehicle for moving from external to internal control. Choice empowers. A famous cartoon shows a young lad explaining his report card to his parents. He says, "No use debating environment versus genetic causes. Either way it's your fault." But the reality is that he does have choices—regardless of the situation, stimulus, or urge.

Situation - I was in an airplane waiting to depart when the pilot announced a two-hour delay. Los Angeles International Airport was fogged in. I joined the other passengers in leaving the plane. Thirty minutes later, the thought occurred to me that if the fog in Los Angeles lifts the plane may take off. I quickly returned to the loading area where I saw the plane departing from the gate. There was nothing I could do about the situation. However, I still had the freedom to *choose my response.*

Stimulus - Students need to learn that regardless of the stimulus, they still have a choice of responses. In a fight, both students were stimulated to act, and each made the choice to hit. No one else made the choice for them. Both students had the freedom to choose their responses to the stimulus.

Impulse - As infants, we wore diapers. As we grew, we discarded them because we were able to assert some control over our physiology. As we mature, emotional growth is also expected. Even when we have an urge or impulse, we still have the freedom to choose our responses. Impulse control is obligatory in a civil society. One successful approach with young children is to post a drawing of a stoplight. The *red* indicates to stop, the *yellow* indicates to state the problem and think of solutions, and the *green* indicates to go with the best choice. As with any change, practice is required, and we should realize that one cannot be perfect and learn at the same time.

Students need to be consciously aware that in any *situation*, or with any *stimulus*, or *urge*, they have freedom to choose their responses. **Teaching young people about choice-response thinking—*that they need not be victims*—may be one of the most valuable thinking patterns we can give them.** The corollary, of course, is that students are held accountable for their choices.

Choice thinking is the primary difference between an optimistic attitude and a pessimistic one. Assume for a moment that an assignment has been returned. Student A did not do well. He concludes, "I'm not good in this subject." He sees an irreversible flaw in himself. Student B also did not do well. But this student thinks, "I guess that means I need to study more." This student sees the setback or poor grade as something *over which he has control.* The other student was resigned to helplessness. The critical difference between optimistic thinking and pessimistic thinking has to do with the power of choosing one's responses.

Effective Discipline

Realizing that no one can really change another person and understanding that choice empowers, we can design an effective discipline program.

Marilyn Gootman maintains in *The Caring Teacher's Guide to Discipline:*

> Discipline means teaching; there should be nothing harsh about that. Substituting the term *classroom management* for *discipline* contradicts my whole approach of teaching. Discipline is teaching children self-control, not controlling or managing them. (Gootman, 1997, p. 17)

Such a program requires three particular, vital educational functions, as Richard Sagor notes in *At-Risk Students:*

- The maintenance of order
- The development of internal locus of control
- The promotion of prosocial behavior (Sagor, 1993, p. 150)

All three are accomplished through a guidance approach in which the *student* acknowledges inappropriate behavior, the *student* self-evaluates, the *student* takes ownership of the problem, and the *student* develops a plan. In the process, the student grows.

This is *in contrast to an external control approach* where the *teacher* takes possession of the problem and the *teacher* presents the student with a plan. This results in overpowerment of some kind, usually in the form of punishment—and in enmity against the teacher.

A choice-response thinking approach is demonstrated through the teacher's interest in the student's growth. This message is clearly communicated through the teacher's words and actions. Disruptive behavior is viewed as a teaching and learning opportunity. When a student understands he will not be punished, it is easy for him to acknowledge inappropriate behavior, self-evaluate, take ownership, and develop a plan. Establishing a noncoercive environment—where people feel they will not be harmed—is a prerequisite for a positive classroom and school climate.

Once a teacher understands that only the student can change himself, one of the greatest plagues besetting teachers is diminished. Stress is reduced because the teacher becomes a guider rather than a punisher, a coach rather than a cop.

Even with students who see the light only when they feel the heat, authority can be used without being punitive. The key to success with these students is that *not losing is more important than winning.* Trapped in a corner, even a mouse will fight. For a student who continues to disrupt the lesson, more restricted choices are given. As long as a student has a choice, confrontations are avoided because the student retains some power and saves face. He has not lost, either publicly in front of his peers or privately on a one-to-one basis.

We need to rethink our thinking about how people are changed. My experiences in teaching on the elementary, middle, and high school levels; in guidance as a middle school and high school counselor; in administration as an elementary and high school principal; and in staff development as director of education have taught me that people change themselves. Offering choices in a noncoercive environment empowers people to change. Creating positive classrooms and learning communities begins by changing our thinking.

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