

ROADTESTED

Removing Roadblocks
to Learning and Leading



How Your Leadership Is Contagious

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A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away (OK, I'm a *Star Wars* geek!), I was thrown into my first turnaround school to help improve behavior and academic achievement. I walked into the school one day, tired and unmotivated, and vividly remember students running down the hallways, ignoring the staff's feeble orders to walk. At that time, I honestly did not know where to begin.

As I moped to my morning duty post, a little girl sauntered up and offered me a flower. This small act of kindness lifted my spirits, and from that day forward, each time I saw the little girl, a large smile crept across my face which was quickly rewarded by the broad grin on hers. In fact, because of my positive reaction to her, other students began going out of their way to shyly wave and smile. This lifted my spirits daily and prompted me to wave and smile at every student and staff member I passed in the hallways.

During transitions, instead of helping teachers "get it right," I began recognizing the few classes that were *trying* to follow school expectations. "Look at this line! Are these 3rd graders?" I'd ask the teacher loudly, knowing darn well they were kindergartners. I can still picture the students proudly puffing out their chests with a "bubble" in their mouths while moving quietly to their next class. As the teacher walked by, I might whisper, "I know this good transition didn't happen magically. Very nice work!"



Soon, the instructional coaches on my turnaround team began doing the same thing. The changes we noticed were nothing short of amazing. Students began meeting expectations as teachers and staff smiled, praised, or gently reminded them of the transitioning rules. Like a ripple effect, these positive behaviors appeared in the classroom, cafeteria, and playground. This was a stark contrast to the coercive interactions observed during my initial observations. While the school made only modest achievement gains that year, the climate and culture clearly saw improvement.

Diagnosing the Dark Side

Fast forward a couple of years, when I gave a workshop on the application of verbal strategies for improving student behavior. The school's staff members were laughing and joking as we practiced applying these strategies in different scenarios. They seemed engaged and their questions and answers let me know they were learning. About halfway through (cue the Darth Vader music), the staff suddenly quieted. Silence spread like a virus. "Did I tell a bad joke?" I wondered. It did not take long to discover the source of the silence. No, it wasn't Darth Vader; the principal had just entered the room.

I won't go into detail about the principal's leadership style, though it's safe to say it wasn't grounded in positive reinforcement. These folks looked afraid. They were good people, and the principal was likely a good

person, too. Unfortunately, this leader didn't understand how to bring out the best in others. One thing the science of human behavior has demonstrated is that when fear of consequences is used to drive behavior, people will perform just well enough to get by, and typically only when the leader (in this case, the deliverer of punishment) is present. In education, it usually results in staff attrition as folks seek out greener pastures.

Finding a Cure

So, why the contrasting stories? If you are a school leader, team leader, line leader, or anybody who has the potential to influence others, look at the behavior of those around you. Are they happy? Do they seek you out and ask for advice? Do they admit when they make a mistake? Do they volunteer for projects? Do they share creative ideas? Do they follow through when you ask them to do something? Or do they become silent in your presence? Avoid you? Deny mistakes and blame others? Frequently call in sick? These behaviors may be a measure of your leadership. (A multirater survey can provide additional insight into staff perceptions.)

Like the proverbial pebble, your behavior influences every facet of a school. In the first example, one little girl's kindness had a ripple effect. I'm not suggesting complex problems can be solved with smiles and kindness (though it's part of the solution), but a fundamental understanding of positive reinforcement *will* help leaders develop staff who voluntarily go above and beyond. Many leaders judge themselves by their intentions. The reality is, others are judging you by your impact. Remember, your behavior is contagious, and your students' and staffs' behavior is often a symptom of your leadership. ■

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