

Picture
Removed

Solving Your People Problems

Do teachers face people problems? Do they need more highly developed interpersonal skills than other professionals? (Do dogs have fleas?) Yes, teachers have problems with students, but they also have other interpersonal problems that complicate their lives. This is illustrated by the following scenario, which is not fictional:

Marvin said to David during class, “I’ll get you at recess” (and you know that he means it). Marvin has terrorized the school and the four previous teachers (in three years). The lower graders won’t play near him. He says you are grossly unfair and have it in for him. His mother admits that her children have problems but lays the blame on her status as a single parent. David, like the other kids, is so afraid of

Marvin that he tells you it was an accident when Marvin knocked him to the floor during gym (you saw Marvin do it and know better). When Marvin took Rudy’s toy and Rudy came to you in tears, Marvin’s mother called Rudy’s mother and said that he didn’t really mean any harm. (The other parents say that Marvin’s mother is a personal friend of the power families in the church, so what can you do?) The school board chairman believes that sending Marvin to public school would drive him away from the Lord. And the conference says you just need to love Marvin into cooperation.

Note how the problem with Marvin spread far beyond the classroom to involve

BY ARTHUR B. DEVLIN

the school board, parents, and the conference. To deal with such problems, today’s teacher needs interpersonal skills as never before. Project Affirmation’s *Valuegenesis: Report I* says that, “An emerging consensus among youth, parents, pastors, teachers, and principals [calls for] ‘a great deal of change.’”¹ In the accompanying report, *Risk and Promise*, present teacher turnover rates of 25 percent per year are “considered excessive.”² Are these problems caused in part by interpersonal problems? Teaching is little else than interpersonal relations, but today those “relations are role-to-role rather than person-to-person.”³

Many teachers could write a book on interpersonal skills. Experience is an excellent resource, but each person’s perspective is as unique as his or her person-

ality. To gain more insight into teacher perceptions about interpersonal problems, the author conducted an informal telephone survey of teachers attending summer school on a Seventh-day Adventist university campus.⁴

Teachers' Report

Elementary teachers in single-grade classrooms reported that more than half of their interpersonal problems were with parents, and only one-fourth were with students. The remainder involved other teachers and/or administrators.

Elementary teachers in one- or two-room schools seemed to be more likely to have stressful relationships with administrators. They reported slightly less trouble with students than did teachers in larger schools.

Secondary teachers reported equal numbers of problems with students and administration. None reported difficulty with parents.

Teachers in higher education reported fewer interpersonal problems with students. On the other hand, many reported problems with other teachers, two specifically mentioning professional jealousy.

Some Thoughts on the Report

The survey was not intended to be definitive and was limited in its scope and methodology, but it did produce one surprising conclusion: In terms of interpersonal problems, teachers ranked student discipline behind differences with parents. Teachers in elementary grades said they would welcome suggestions for dealing with parents who either did not involve themselves in the education of their children, or who differed strongly with the school about how to deal with students.

Why the differences among the various types of schools? Fewer teacher-administrator concerns might be expected from large elementary schools. Perhaps it is because teachers in large schools tend to deal with principals rather than with boards, pastors, and a distant conference office. Secondary teachers' lack of problems with parents probably result from parents' calling the principal, not only about grades, but also about dormitory life (and the bill).

Causes of Interpersonal Stress

"Understanding the individual is probably the most challenging aspect of successful management, whether in business, education or government. . . . The

Today's teacher needs interpersonal skills as never before.

individual . . . is always a tantalizing enigma because of his perverse refusal to conform to any rigid rule or measure of intellect, emotion, or attitude."⁵

Today the school must not only educate students, but also take over functions that once were served by the home: male and female role modeling, motivating, nurturing, and supporting. So how do teachers achieve this monumental task? Are they doomed to simply muddle through one crisis after another?⁶

Teachers' educational skills set them apart from parents. What is automatic and clear to them may not occur to people without their training. Indeed, "experience is a handicap rather than an asset unless we learn how to cope with it."⁷ As teachers, we must make allowances for others without appearing condescending. This means asking ourselves these questions: (1) Do I know my job? (2) Do I behave like a human being and recognize that others are also human beings? (3) Do students make progress *because* of me or *in spite* of me? (4) Do others learn from me more *bad things to avoid* or more *good things to copy* in their own behavior? (5) When students refer to me in retrospect, are those references primarily positive or negative?⁸

Teachers contend with *group dynamics* that are quite different from what occurs in the home. They see a somewhat different child from the one the parent sees. Some teachers are "not aware of the nature of groups, how and why they function, why some groups are effective and others are not, how group goals and group standards are established, and the many and varied aspects of group life within organizational life."⁹

Communities Differ

A successful teacher from New York may have problems in Appalachia. This may result from educators and parents having different expectations. Firestone describes one such case: "The local community disagreed with the professionals' concept of the student as a potentially self-

motivated learner. Instead, they viewed children as recalcitrant and school work as a difficult activity that children would not undertake voluntarily."¹⁰

Here are some suggestions that have proved their usefulness: (1) Get out into the community and meet people. City-dwellers tend to keep to themselves; rural communities often see this as unfriendliness. (2) Get into the students' homes and meet their families. As one teacher said, "A teacher on the feet is worth 10 on their seat." (3) Become aware of your own attitudes. The differences between rural and urban communities are often "space" and "place." Country teachers in the city should try to be less forward—allow others some "space." City teachers in the country should respect cultural ties to "place." One universal need is the need to communicate that you care; this is welcomed the world over.

Dealing With the School Board

School board members often have little formal training in education. This increases the likelihood of conflict between professional school administrators and school boards.¹¹ Board members may not know the legal liabilities of confidentiality and board responsibility. Writing materials for lay board members may be a wise investment,¹² and training sessions for new members are a good idea.

One may expect conflict unless responsibilities are clearly defined. Teachers teach; boards do not. Boards manage the larger affairs of the school; teachers should let them.¹³ In the Adventist system the K-12 board hires and fires. The local boards do not.

In addition, once responsibility is clarified, it must be accepted. In smaller schools, lay treasurers should not take the job if they do not want to discuss money with parents. This should not be the teacher's responsibility. It does not help a teacher bending over a problem student's desk to think silently, "...and your parents haven't paid your bill, either!"

Small Schools Have Special Problems

In a small school, the instructional leader is also an administrator. This is often a mixed blessing, depending upon the leader and his or her leadership skills.¹⁴

One- or two-teacher schools are far from the conference office. With mail and telephone as their only communications links, superintendents cannot have the

same knowledge of day-to-day affairs that principals consider routine. Occasionally someone from the conference office meets with the board, but this often occurs when partisans are trying to exert influence or make a point.

Small-schools teachers need board skills. This involves a special kind of teamwork—the ability to reach consensus, to achieve goals. As conflicting ideas are exposed and resolved, the meeting achieves greater success. Whether someone makes a good teammate depends on his or her ability to *disagree*, to express opinions, and create the very *opposite* of what we normally understand to be good team playing.¹⁵

Improving Communication

Communication is often impersonal between teachers and others, even students. Letters to parents, worksheets, and memoranda for the board are all indirect communication. We must seek to make the impersonal personal, even if we must do so through the use of today's technology, the (im)personal computer. Personalized notes, assignments, and other communications can be written with a computer more easily and quickly than by hand. Also, since notes are inevitable, personalized ones beat generic ones.

How to Improve Interpersonal Skills

Start with yourself. Certain personality skills are an asset. These can be cultivated. "To be an expert learner, first set the psychological scene: (1) Have confidence in your ability. (2) Want to learn. (3) You do have enough time. 'I don't have enough time' is not a valid excuse for not learning. Learning is a twenty-four hour a day job."¹⁶

Be objective, even when it is not easy. Sometimes we create our own illusions. Our most trying problems are often the results of self-deception. Too often we assume the doors are locked against us, when the difficulty is actually our own mental block.¹⁷ Don't get so caught up in your own thinking that you can't accept counsel. Each of us needs feedback from others about our behavior and its effects.¹⁸

See things from another's point of view. This requires empathy, a spontaneous response to another human being—the ability to understand and share experiences.¹⁹ The opposite, *parochialism*, "means viewing the world solely through one's own eyes and perspective. A person with a parochial perspective does not recognize

other people's different ways of living and working."²⁰

Pace yourself. Many burn out because they do not pace themselves. They wear themselves out by going full tilt at everything they do. Sometimes it is best to idle. But at cruising speed we perform best, and get the best results.²¹ Jesus said, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."²²

Cultivate a relaxed manner. "Blessed is he who can relax among his superiors as well as inferiors and be respectful to both. A relaxed personality invites other people to drop the mask and identify themselves."²³

Remember, "it is much easier to make a mistake than to admit one."²⁴ Apologize for and *learn* from your mistakes, and learn to relax.²⁵ And remember, there is no more calming exercise than communion

In terms of interpersonal problems, teachers in the informal survey ranked student discipline behind differences with parents.

with God.

Set priorities. One of life's most valuable lessons is that *you cannot possibly get it all done*. You may even find that "eventually, some of the mail that you did not answer on time will become obsolete, and the things you worried about will be solved by completely unexpected forces."²⁶ "[The] question is, what kind of neglect are *you* practicing with the lower half of *your* priority list?"²⁷ Concentrate on the most important things you have to do.

Control yourself. Today's schools test self-control more than ever before. Teachers must maintain composure under confrontation and frustration,²⁸ using the two "P's"—"patience" and "poise."

Accept stress as part of life. "Accepting and learning to handle and communicate emotions is the mark of maturity."²⁹ We must deal with our emotions when under stress, not just put a lid on them. "The

most common cause of fatigue and actual sickness is the repression of emotions."³⁰ "Many failures come about because we are looking for a scapegoat."³¹ Recognizing stress and acknowledging our emotions helps protect us from blaming others.

Work off your stress. Many teachers suffer from a lack of exercise. "If you are angry or upset, try to do something physical such as running, gardening, playing tennis, or cleaning out the garage. Working the stress out of your system will leave you much better prepared to handle your problem."³²

"Ministers, teachers, students, and other brain workers often suffer from illness as the result of severe mental taxation, unrelieved by physical exercise. What these persons need is a more active life . . . Outdoor exercise is the best; it should be so planned as to strengthen by use of the organs that have become weakened; and the heart should be in it."³³

You and Others

Try new interpersonal methods. The GGMG-PRD model developed by several researchers says, Get the other person's input, Give your own view, Merge them into a solution, and Go through the following steps to a mutual solution. Problems: Identify them. Reasons: Are they environmental or personal? Directions: Develop a direction for each reason and solve the problem.³⁴ Read publications devoted expressly to suggestions on how teachers may deal with others, parents, students, and administrators.³⁵

Don't do all the talking—ask. This is key to getting along with people. If you want to know what's wrong, ask. Try a self-evaluation survey. Each of us can benefit from knowing what others think.

Be honest. "The more open you are with another, the greater likelihood there will be that they will be more open with you. Play your cards close to your chest, and so will they."³⁶ As a school board member from Ohio has said, "Openness and honesty should be the basis of all board and district communication."³⁷

Listen actively. There is a big difference between *hearing* and *listening*. People who only hear can tune others out. People who listen mentally absorb what they hear.³⁸

Don't be too quick to come to conclusions about other people. Stubbornness may be often nothing more than fear of giving up a difficult armor that helped the person cope with life.³⁹

Get some help. One of the reasons for

poor interpersonal skills is simple exhaustion. Though student assistance is more common in the smaller school, it is beneficial to the students—and teachers—of every school. Delegate, delegate, delegate—keeping in mind that “the distinction between *delegation* and *abdication* is a very fine one.”⁴⁰ Use your assets—the students. “Children who attend school in small buildings, where there are few students, frequently feel responsibility for the welfare of the group.”⁴¹

Risk something of yourself to help others. One author says he has “more respect for the man who makes a wrong decision in an emergency than for the man who wrings his hands and takes refuge in the rule book.”⁴² Don’t be afraid to do for one person what you would not do for another—if the need is unique and the situation warrants it. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”⁴³ The teacher or administrator must be a “helper.” To be perceived otherwise is to lose effectiveness.⁴⁴

Ease friction between colleagues. This is a common problem from elementary school through higher education.

*When envy builds a chill wall between [people], the obvious reason is often ignored. Instead, a false issue—usually some picayune personal issue—is enlarged in self-justification. Most of the time, getting along with people is the art of doing the “obvious thing,” of being considerate, accessible and friendly when we could be cynical or arrogant, but the obvious is overlooked by people who always assume there is another way.*⁴⁵

We have looked at teachers’ interpersonal problems—both causes and some remedies. This article will not solve all of the problems, or prepare a teacher for them. The references accompanying this article offer suggestions to be perused at leisure by those who wish to improve and to be read earnestly by those who sense a real need.

As Christian educators we should be models of interpersonal tact, but all of us are not yet ready for translation. Careful attention to Christian principles of interpersonal communication *can* make your school a little more like heaven on earth. ☺

Arthur B. Devlin is a Doctoral Student at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michi-

Picture
Removed

gan. A small-schools specialist, he has taught at all levels, from elementary through graduate school, in Tennessee, Georgia, and Michigan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Peter Benson and Michael J. Donahue, *Value-Genesis: Report 1* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990), pp. 42-44.
2. Charles T. Smith (Coordinator), *Risk and Promise: A Report of the Project Affirmation Taskforces* (Silver Spring, Md: North American Division Office of Education, 1990), p. 3.
3. Robert R. Carkhuff, *IPS: Interpersonal Skills and Human Productivity* (Amherst, Mass.: Human Resource Development Press, Inc., 1983), p. 2.
4. By telephone and personal interview, the author surveyed 30 teachers enrolled in the 1992 summer-school session at Andrews University: 13 in elementary, 11 in secondary, and six in higher education. Teachers were asked, “What are your greatest interpersonal problems as a teacher?” and, “With whom do you have your greatest interpersonal problems as a teacher?” To protect anonymity, answers were entered under categories without reference to who gave them, except to note the level of the teacher’s employment.
5. A. M. Sullivan, quoted in Harold Lazarus (ed.), *Human Values in Management: The Business Philosophy of A. M. Sullivan* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), p. 6.
6. Ernest Dichter, *The Naked Manager* (Boston: Cahners Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), p. 3.
7. Charles F. Austin, *Management’s Self-Inflicted Wounds: A Formula for Executive Self-Analysis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 89.
8. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
10. William A. Firestone, *Great Expectations for Small Schools: The Limitations of Federal Projects* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), pp. 33, 34.
11. Samuel B. Bacharach, (ed.), *Organizational Behavior in Schools and School Districts* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), p. 468.
12. *Becoming a Better Board Member: A Guide to Effective School Board Service* (Washington, D.C.: National School Boards Association, 1982).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. *Instructional Leadership in Small Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and

Curriculum Development, 1951), p. 12.

15. Ernest Dichter, *How Hot a Manager Are You?* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987), p. 112.
16. Dichter, *The Naked Manager*, p. 85.
17. Sullivan, quoted in Lazarus, p. 24.
18. Leslie Rae, *The Skills of Human Relations Training: A Guide for Managers and Practitioners* (New York: Nichols Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 11, 12.
19. Dichter, 1974, p. 123.
20. Nancy J. Adler, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* (Boston: PWS-Kent Publishing Company, 1991), p. 11.
21. Sullivan, quoted in Lazarus, p. 49.
22. Mark 6:31, NIV.
23. Sullivan, quoted in Lazarus, p. 8.
24. *Instructional Leadership in Small Schools*, p. 47.
25. Velma Walker and Lynn Brokaw, *Becoming Aware: A Human Relations Handbook* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1986), p. 94.
26. Dichter, 1974, p. 9.
27. Austin, p. 48.
28. Walker and Brokaw, p. 81.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
31. Dichter (1974), p. 16.
32. Walker and Brokaw, p. 93.
33. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), pp. 238, 239.
34. Carkhuff, p. 9.
35. For example, Robert L. DeBruyn, *The Master Teacher* (Manhattan, Kansas: The Master Teacher, Inc.).
36. Rae, p. 12.
37. *Becoming a Better Board Member: A Guide to Effective School Board Service* (Washington, D.C.: National School Board Association, 1982), p. 238.
38. Robert B. Blackmer, “Accelerated A.C.H.I.E.V.E.M.E.N.T.” Unpublished manuscript, 1988.
39. Dichter, 1974, p. 69.
40. Austin, p. 96.
41. *Instructional Leadership in Small Schools*, p. 22.
42. Sullivan, quoted in Lazarus, p. 12.
43. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” from *Essays: First Series* (1841).
44. Carkhuff, p. 4.
45. Sullivan, quoted in Lazarus, p. 25.