Chapter Twenty Four

Dealing with Typical Classroom Crises

Preview

- The Backup System is a hierarchy of consequences for dealing with severe or repetitive discipline problems.
- Once a student is sent to the office, management becomes expensive because it consumes the time of at least two professionals and often requires meetings and paperwork.
- It is far cheaper to nip the problem in the bud. But what, exactly, do you do when such a nasty problem first occurs in the classroom?
- Most teachers enter the profession without a clear answer to this question. Consequently, when the time comes, they must "wing it."
- Small backup response options provide strategies for nipping problems "in the bud." These responses are low-key and private. Yet they clearly communicate to the student that "enough is enough."

Beyond Limit Setting

What the...?

As you turn from writing a sentence on the board, you see something fly across the room.

"What the...?"

Your head quickly follows the trajectory back to its source. You catch Larry as his body comes around. He gives you his innocent look.

Your brainstem shouts out, "Why you little..."

Meanwhile, your cortex whispers, "Slow down. Take a relaxing breath. Turn in a regal fashion."

What Next?

Larry is trying to disappear, but he knows he's been busted. Your lesson has come to a halt. Everybody can tell that this is serious.

As you take another relaxing breath, you size up the situation. You have time to think: "I can't just go on teaching after something like that. Should I send him to the office? He's just sitting there innocently now."

Do You Have a Plan?

In your training to be a teacher, did you ever receive a clear answer to the following question? Exactly what do you do when a student pulls some stunt in your classroom that causes you to say to yourself, *I never want to see that in here again?*

I have asked that question to thousands of teachers in dozens of locations, and almost never does a hand go up. This should teach us something. There is no plan. Our profession does not have any straightforward, generally understood way of dealing with one of the most predictable discipline management dilemmas that might occur in the classroom.

With no plan of action, we are left to devise some kind of plan on our own. We read a book. We ask the teacher down the hall. We search our memories. We beg, borrow, and steal and finally we "wing it."

What do you think the odds are that thousands of young teachers will all come up with a good plan during their first year on the job? And, once they come up with a plan, what do you think the odds are that they will ever change it?

The Structure of the Backup System

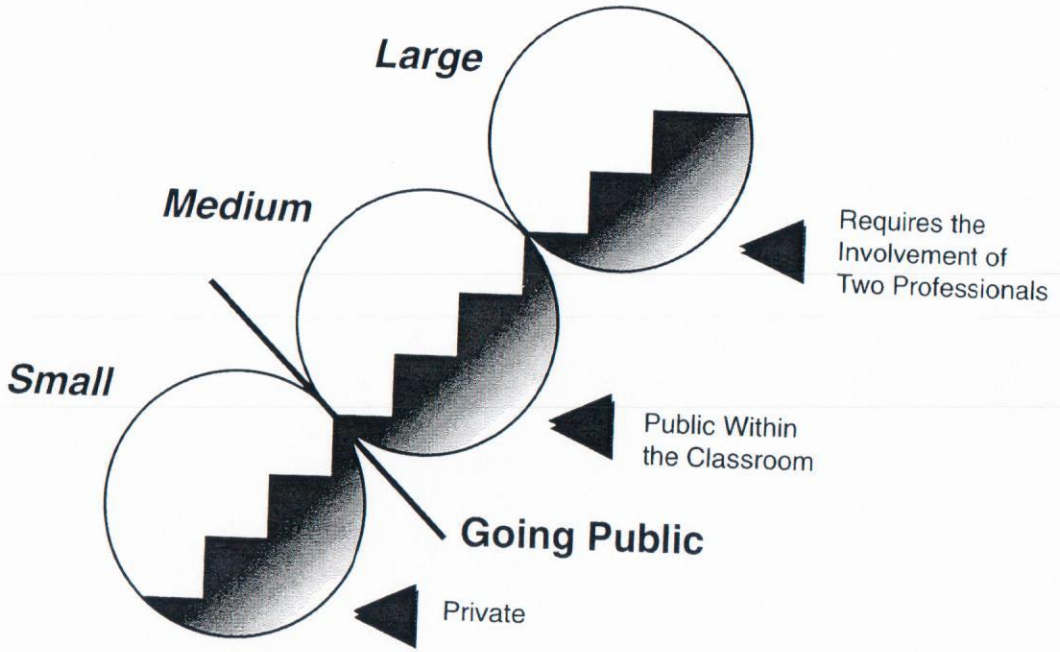
A Hierarchy of Consequences

The Backup System is a hierarchy of consequences arranged in a stair step fashion from small to large. The logic of the Backup System was discussed briefly at the beginning of chapter 13, "Understanding Brat Behavior." This logic is timeless – *the punishment fits the crime.* The bigger the crime, the bigger the punishment.

The objective of the Backup System is to suppress the unacceptable behavior so that it does not reappear. This is done by raising the price of a behavior to the point where the student is no longer willing to pay for it. As you go up the Backup System, unfortunately, the program becomes more expensive for everyone involved.

Certain of the milder consequences are under the teacher's control *within the classroom.* Common examples that you may remember from your childhood include keeping a student in from recess, talking to a student after class, or keeping a student after school.

The remainder of consequences at the school site occur *outside of the classroom* where they are referred to as "The



As you go up the Backup System, the program becomes more expensive for everyone involved.

School Discipline Code." These, too, have not changed much since you were a kid and include being sent to the office, detention, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension.

Beyond the school district, the Backup System is administered by the juvenile justice system and the criminal justice system. It is a rare high school administrator who has not had some dealings with juvenile hall.

Problems with the School Discipline Code

We had some fun with the School Discipline Code at the beginning of chapter 13 with our "mock freshman assembly." As we all know, the same 5 percent of the student body, the "Larrys," produce 90-95 percent of the office referrals for as long as they are in school. Year after year, we ask our school discipline system to "put the lid on." And, year after year, we are left frustrated, muttering to ourselves,

It should work!

Why doesn't it?

What do we have to do to make it work?

No matter how many times we convene a task force to revise the School Discipline Code, nothing ever changes. For one thing, as I mentioned earlier, there is nothing that you can legally do to Larry that every educator has not known about since his or her first day on the job. And, secondly, many of the things that we do try, like kicking Larry out of class or out of school, backfire by reinforcing him for giving us a hard time.

Levels to the Game

The diagram on the opposite page is a schematic of the "hierarchy of consequences" with consequences divided into three sections, *small, medium, and large.* The three levels of the Backup System can be described as follows:

- **Large** – Large backup responses require help from outside of the classroom. Sending a student to the office, assigning detention, or suspending a student are the most common examples.

  Large backup options are expensive because they consume the time of at least two professionals and often require meetings after school and extensive paperwork. In addition, by the time you send a student to the office, you have already paid a high price in terms of stress.

  Since large backup responses can serve as stress reducers just by getting rid of Larry for a while, they have a tendency to become addictive. A certain percentage of teachers on any faculty will repeatedly "bounce" students to the office just to make them disappear.

- **Medium** – Medium backup responses occur within the classroom. Their defining characteristic, apart from being under the teacher's control, is that they are *public.*

  Most of the classroom sanctions that we remember from childhood come under this category. There is nothing private about having your name put on the board, being sent to time-out or being kept after class for a talk with the teacher.

  Medium backup responses tend to be cheaper than large ones because they consume the time of only one professional while rarely requiring extra meetings or paperwork. However, a hidden cost of these sanctions can be the revenge of an embarrassed student who was antagonistic to begin with.

- **Small** – Small backup responses provide teachers with a clear idea of what to do the *first time* they see a problem that they never want to see again. They are your first line of defense.

Small backup responses are *private*. They are *subtle*. The rest of the class usually does not even know that they occurred. Consequently, small backup responses avoid the potential for revenge from an embarrassed student.

It is the job of small backup responses to "nip problems in the bud." They say to the student, in effect,

> *You are entering the Backup System. A word to the wise. Stop what you are doing now while it is still cheap. The price will only go up from here.*

If the student takes the teacher seriously and stops goofing off, management is cheap for everyone. As you can see, however, it all hinges on the student taking the teacher seriously.

Classroom versus School Site Discipline Management

While it is important for a teacher to understand the Backup System in its totality, most of the Backup System occurs outside of the teacher's classroom. Rather than being part of classroom management, it falls under the heading of school-site management.

School-site management covers anything that happens outside of your door. It includes the management of noise in the halls, litter and graffiti, and rowdiness during assemblies, in the lunch room, on the school grounds, and at the bus dock.

Effective school-site management has been described in detail in the books, *Positive Classroom Discipline* and *Positive Classroom Instruction*. Relevant chapters will be posted on our web site **www.fredjones.com** so that you may read them at will. Since this book describes the skills of *classroom* management, our discussion of the backup system will focus upon sanctions that teachers can use by themselves within the classroom to keep small problems from becoming large.

Using Small Backup Responses

Entering the Backup System

You will typically enter the Backup System for one of two reasons:

- A sudden obnoxious incident
- A repeat disruptor

While obnoxious incidents are plain to see, it would be worth our while to spend some time with *repeat disruptors*. As I mentioned in chapter 19, "Adjusting As You Go," some kids come from homes in which the parents never follow through after saying "no." These children learn to simply pause when they are told to stop *until the parent looks away*. Then, they continue doing as they please.

When you see the this pattern a few times, a red flag should go up in your brain that says, *We may have a repeater.* When you conclude that you do, it is time to go to the Backup System. There is no point in playing this game all year.

After you have used the Backup System to make the point that "no means no," you can probably fade your consequences back to Limit Setting. Until you make that point in no uncertain terms, repeaters assume that you are a "weenie" like mom and dad.

Camouflage and Containment

During training I do a demonstration in which I say to the trainees,

> "I am going to model working the crowd. It is a boring demonstration because working the crowd is never dramatic.
>
> "Watch carefully though, because, when I am done, I will ask you a question. Do not guess at the answer. If you know the answer, raise your hand."

As I work the crowd, I interact briefly with a series of students just as any teacher might during Guided Practice. Then, I say to the group,

"Raise your hand if you know who is in trouble."

No hands go up – not even the hands of those sitting next to the person who is "in trouble." Then I say,

As with meaning business, working the crowd provides the camouflage that allows your Backup System to be invisible.

"Let me tell you why you do not know who is in trouble. Because, I don't *want* you to know. It is none of your business.

"Will the people who received corrective feedback on a math problem please raise your hands (two hands go up). Will the people whose work I checked please raise your hands (two more hands go up). Now, will the person who is in trouble please raise your hand."

Some mild laughter ripples through the group as those sitting next to the person "in trouble" realize that they were unaware of it.

"One of the things that we learn from this demonstration is that, when you are working the crowd, the students cannot tell *corrective feedback* from *work check* from your *Backup System.* They all look the same.

"When you are working the crowd, you talk to students from close range. You typically lean over to whisper so as not to pull other students off task. Consequently, it is a private communication."

As with meaning business, *working the crowd* provides the camouflage that allows your Backup System to be invisible. When discipline management is invisible, you have a greater ability to keep small problems small.

Just a Warning?

What I said to the student "in trouble" was:

"This is the second time I have had to deal with this talking, and I want it to stop. If I see any more talking, we will have a little conversation of our

own after class. For right now, all I really care about is getting some of this work done."

This is a verbal warning. The specific words are not critical. You will ad-lib something of this general nature when the time comes.

But there are warnings, and then, there are warnings. I could have admonished the disruptive student in front of the class, or I could have written the student's name on the board. Both are types of warnings commonly used by teachers. But they would have been *public events.*

Imagine that you are sixteen years old in a high school class full of your friends, and the teacher calls you down in front of your peer group. How would you feel toward that teacher? Would you get even?

If you were the teacher, that student's "getting even" would be your next discipline problem. Isn't it a little self-defeating to have the "solution" to one discipline problem be the cause of the next one?

Keep It Private

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, there is no such thing as a win-lose situation at this level of discipline management. It is win-win or lose-lose. If you make students look foolish in front of their peer group, they will make you look foolish in front of the same peer group.

If, on the other hand, you are protective of the students, even when they are out of line, they will probably cut you some slack when you need it. At the very least, they will have no reason for revenge.

If the warning is a public event, it is a *medium* backup response that unavoidably involves the peer group. If the warning is private, it is a *small* backup response that does not involve the peer group. It would be far more protective of the student and far less risky for you to keep the warning as private as possible.

The Function of Small Backup Responses

A Word to the Wise

Small Backup responses are a series of two or three messages, arranged in order of increasing explicitness. As mentioned earlier, they say to the student,

"You are entering the Backup System. A word to the wise..."

The objective of these communications is to get the student to fold in the poker game before the price gets high for everyone.

Goofing off in the classroom is typically a penny-ante game. Kids are rarely in it for big risks and high stakes. Usually they are just in it for a diversion in the midst of work. Most of the time the students will fold before the price gets too high if you give them a chance to do so gracefully. Of course, all bets are off if you embarrass them or back them into a corner.

Self-Defeating

If you make students look foolish in front of their peer group, they will make you look foolish in front of the same peer group.

Isn't it a little self-defeating to have the "solution" to one discipline problem be the cause of the next one?

An Invitation to Fold

Small backup responses are *communications,* not sanctions. They are "promissory notes." Their objective is to:

- inform students that they are entering the Backup System (i.e., that you have had about enough of their foolishness)
- invite students to fold (i.e., to cool it before you are forced to deliver consequences with real price tags attached)

You are making an offer that the student would be foolish to refuse. Most of the time, unless students have a big chip on their shoulders, they will make the pragmatic choice and keep "the price of doing business" low.

The backup response options listed below are arranged from most private (smallest) to most explicit (largest). Most of them have been around forever, and you may be able to add an item or two of your own to the list. The two or three that you choose may differ depending on the student and the situation.

Students will usually fold before the price gets too high, if they can do so gracefully.

Small Backup Options

Pre-Warning

A pre-warning clearly communicates that "enough is enough" without specifying consequences. This gives you time to observe the situation, and it gives the student time to think. A fourth grade teacher from Memphis, a "natural" if I ever saw one, described her pre-warning to me. She said,

"Students know perfectly well when they are 'stepping over the line.' Rather than letting it slide, I will confront that person privately with my most serious demeanor. I will look the student in the eye and say, 'If I see any more of this behavior whatsoever, I am going to have to start planing what to do.'

"Their eyes get big. The student knows that I am serious. Rarely do I ever have to 'start planning' what to do."

A pre-warning often elicits a short burst of nervous laughter from students. Due to the teacher's manner, students know that it is a serious matter. But when they process the words, they realize to their relief that they are not really "in trouble" yet.

A pre-warning is frequently all that you need. It serves as a "wake-up call" to students who are too busy "goofing off" to realize that they are being inappropriate. If the problem continues, you can always go to an explicit warning.

Warning

Warnings have already been discussed in detail. A warning describes the consequence to the student if you "see this behavior one more time." A warning is *never* a bluff.

Pulling the Card

Imagine that you have a 3-by-5 card file on your desk containing each student's name, address, and home phone. Having students fill out these cards is not a bad Bell Work activity on the first day of school.

Imagine, further, that you have given a warning to a student, let's call him Larry as usual. You look up to see Larry doing "it" again. You catch his eye as you take a relaxing breath. He gives you his best "oops, sorry" look.

Slowly, without calling any attention to yourself, walk to your desk and casually pick up the card file. Leaf through it, and pull out Larry's card as you look at him. Lay the card on the corner of your desk face up. Look at Larry again with your best Queen Victoria face as you place the card file back on your desk. Then return to what you were doing, giving Larry one final look.

Obviously, you are communicating with Larry. He would have to be pretty dense not to realize whose name, address and home phone number is sitting face-up on the corner of your desk.

- Dear _____, today in class I have had to deal with (briefly describe the problem behavior).
- I need your help.
- If we work together now, we can prevent this from becoming a "real" problem.
- I will call you tomorrow at which time we can make a plan.
- Thank you for your help.

Sign the letter, and put it in an envelope. Address the envelope, but don't waste a stamp yet. Take the letter and a piece of tape to the student's desk. Lean over and tape the letter on the desk, and whisper to the student as privately as possible,

"This is a letter home to your parents describing exactly what I have had to put up with in here today. If I see *no* more of this behavior before the end of the (day, for young students, or week, for older students), then, with my permission and in front of my eyes, you may tear up this letter and throw it away.

"If, however, I see *any* more of this behavior, I will send the letter home even if I have to hand-deliver it. Do I make myself clear?

"For now, all I really care about is getting some of this work done. Let's see if we can keep life simple."

The letter on the desk is what you might call a visual prompt. It can serve as a continual reminder to be wise.

I am sometimes asked, "What would you do if the student just tore up the letter and threw it on the floor?" This question is almost always asked in a tone that says, "These little sanctions won't work with some of my students."

To put small backup responses into perspective, let me emphasize again that the critical variable in a well implemented Backup System is *never* your success. The only critical variable is the price paid by the student. As I have mentioned, you cannot guarantee any outcome because you are only half of the equation. The ultimate price is determined by the student. If the student forces you to deliver stiffer sanctions, then deliver them.

Medium Backup Options

Medium backup responses include those public classroom sanctions that are familiar to us from our own schooling. Some, such as public warnings and reprimands, tend to be counter-productive because they generate resentment. Others, such as time-out, can serve the teacher well by providing an unequivocal means of saying "no" that is nonadversarial.

Because medium backup responses are familiar to us, it is easy to assume that we understand them. As always in the implementation of classroom management procedures, however, the devil is in the details. This section describes the details of some of the more common and useful procedures in order to maximize their success rate.

Heart-to-Heart Talk

When a problem reoccurs in class, my first instinct is to have a talk with the student to find out what is going on. Have the student do most of the talking.

"Jennifer, tell me, what was going on in class today between you and Michelle?"

Good clinicians are masters of wait time, and they are masters of making the other person do all of the work.

"What are we going to have to do to resolve this problem?"

Sometimes it is possible to have this conversation privately during class time. But, usually it will be after class.

Time-Out in the Classroom

Time-out has served as an alternative to more punitive sanctions in behavior management during recent decades. Time-out, however, is a prime example of a detailed procedure that is often used casually – "Like benching a kid, right?" Well, not exactly.

For starters, time-out should have the following elements:

- Two time-out areas should be prepared in the classroom since problems often involve two students. These need to be visually isolated so that the students in time-out cannot entertain each other or the rest of the class.
- Time-out should be considered an extension of meaning business with the same body language and the same withering boredom in response to any wheedling or arguing.
- Time-out should be relatively brief, usually not in excess of five minutes.
- Time-out should be boring. It is time away from desirable activity. There should be no "bootleg" sources of entertainment available in the time-out area.

The first problem with using time-out hits you as soon as you try to find two visually isolated areas in the classroom. It is hard enough to find just one.

The second problem in using time-out is the natural resistance of young people to being bored. If they would just sit in time-out quietly and be repentant, the whole thing would be so simple. But, instead, students who are squirrely in class tend to be squirrely in time-out.

Time-Out in a Colleague's Classroom

If a student continues to disrupt after being sent to time-out, you might consider time-out in a colleague's classroom. It often produces more reliable results than dealing with the office, and it sends the message that the teachers can handle serious problems themselves. The fine points of time-out in a colleague's classroom are as follows:

- The colleague to which the student is sent must thoroughly understand the program, approve of it and feel free to reciprocate should he or she need to.
- Time-out in a colleague's classroom should last for the remainder of the period or for at least 20 minutes.
- The student should be delivered to the colleague's classroom with a folder of work.
- The student must do the work in the folder during the entire time that he or she is in time-out. Academic help from the teacher should be brief and matter-of-fact.
- The student cannot join in any classroom games or activities. Usually he or she sits facing the wall so as not to be distracted or entertained.
- Finally, the student should be separated from his or her peer group *by as many years as possible.*

This last condition is perhaps the *most important* of all since it almost guarantees that the student will not want to repeat the experience. Yet, it is the condition that is *most commonly violated.* It is far easier for a fifth grade teacher to send Larry

The Key to Success

The key to success with a Backup System is not the size of the negative sanction.

Rather, the key to success is *the person who is using the Backup System.*