Eliminating Backtalk

If you fail to have a fight-flight reflex under these conditions, you may need to consult a mortician. The rest of us will be sucking in a breath.

Setting You Up to Speak

If you have a fight-flight reflex, you are predisposed to speak. Nagging, pheasant posturing, and snap and snarl are common classroom examples. In addition, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, speech is a *trigger mechanism.* The most predictable way of getting someone to speak to you is for you to speak to them.

When students confront you verbally, everything they are doing seems calculated to *get you to speak.* Could there be a method to this madness?

The Cardinal Error

Having the Last Word

Let's begin with an example of the *garden variety wheedling* that is most common in the classroom. This will be a less emotionally charged situation than the one described above.

The simplest form of wheedling is denial. Denial requires perhaps three neurons.

"I wasn't doin' anything."

"Was not."

To denial we will add its companion, blaming.

"She started it."

"He was asking me a question."

It takes one fool to backtalk. It takes two fools to make a conversation out of it.

Finally, to this display of garden variety wheedling, we will add a teacher who is committing the *Cardinal Error.* The Cardinal Error when dealing with backtalk is *backtalk.* Taking the scene from the top, it might go like this:

Teacher: "Vanessa, I would like you to bring your chair around and get some work done."

Student: "I wasn't doing anything."

Teacher: "You have been talking this whole period, and I want it to stop."

Student: "No I wasn't."

Teacher: "Every time I look up, I see you talking to Serena."

Student: "She was just asking me a question."

Teacher: "I don't care who was asking who what. When I look up, I expect to see you doing your own work."

Student: "Yeah, but..."

Have you had enough yet? Who do you think will look foolish by the time this conversation winds down?

When you were four years old, you already had the social skills required to have the last word in an argument if you wanted it badly enough. All it takes is perseverance.

The First Rule of Backtalk

Two children arguing is a fairly common sight to a parent. But watching a child and a teacher argue is a bit disconcerting – which brings us to our *first* rule of backtalk:

It takes one fool to backtalk.
It takes two fools to make a conversation out of it.

The first fool is the *child.* Children will be foolish sometimes, but the normal immaturity of children does not worry me. What worries me is the *second* fool. The second fool is always the *teacher.* It is the teacher's backtalk that will get this student sent to the office.

One of the most common scenarios for a student being sent to the office is the following:

- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.

Open your mouth, and slit your throat.

By this point in the conversation, teachers will realize that they have dug their hole so deep that the only way out is to "pull rank." That is why backtalk is the most common complaint in office referrals.

Roles in a Melodrama

Think of backtalk as a melodrama which is written, produced, and directed by the *student.* In this melodrama there is a speaking part for *you.*

If you accept your speaking part in the melodrama, it is "show time." But if you do not, the show bombs. This brings us to our *second* rule of backtalk:

Open your mouth, and slit your throat.

Imagine the conversation between teacher and student described earlier if the teacher had had the good sense to keep his or her *mouth shut.*

Teacher: "Vanessa, I would like you to bring your chair around and get some work done."

Student: "I wasn't doing anything."

Teacher: (silence)

Student: "Well, I wasn't."

Teacher: (silence)

Student: "But,"

Teacher: (silence)

Student: (silence)

Students may try to keep the show going for a while, but they cannot keep it going *all by themselves.* When they run out of material, embarrassment sets in. When students begin to feel foolish, they usually fold. Getting back to work suddenly becomes the quickest way to disappear.

Switching the Agenda

Seducing the Teacher

There are three agendas in classroom management; discipline, instruction and motivation. As you know from previous chapters, these three agendas represent very different management procedures. While these procedures compliment each other, they do not greatly overlap.

Consequently, if students can seduce the teacher from discipline into either of the other two agendas, discipline management is left behind. This is a very shrewd move for students since they get off the hook with little risk of provoking the teacher.

Switching to Instruction

The most common switch is from discipline to instruction. It delivers maximum benefit at minimum risk.

Have you ever prompted a student who is *talking to neighbors* by saying,

"I would like you to turn around and get to work,"

only to have the student respond,

"But, I don't understand how to do this problem"?

You ought to give the student extra credit for knowing how to play the game.

Recognizing Backtalk

The way you recognize backtalk is by the fact that the kid's mouth is open.

Now, let me show you a naive teacher biting on the bait. In response to the student's help-seeking, the teacher says,

"What part don't you understand?"

It's over! You lose! You may as well say to the class,

"Class, let me explain what just happened so that you will all understand. Go ahead and talk to your neighbors. If I see it, and if I walk all of the way over to you in order to deal with it, this is what you do. Look up innocently and say, 'But, I don't understand how to do this problem.' The worst thing that will ever happen to you in my classroom is that I will do part of your assignment for you."

Not too surprisingly, over 70 percent of backtalk in the classroom is switching the agenda to instruction. Switching the agenda to instruction is such a cool plan that I sometimes wonder why students would use anything else. It is a no-lose strategy. Even if students do not get off the hook, they run no risk of getting into trouble because teachers never identify *switching the agenda* as backtalk. Teachers seem to think that backtalk has to be obnoxious. It does not.

At this point you may be wondering, *Well, then, what is backtalk?* Let me give you a simple answer to save you confusion. The way you recognize backtalk is by the fact that *the kid's mouth is open.*

So, what should I do? you might ask. This is a very tricky question, which is another reason why students love to use this strategy.

Let me give you the easy answer first. Take two relaxing breaths, check your jaw, clear your mind, and keep your mouth shut as you kill time. When the backtalker runs out of gas, take two more relaxing breaths and then, if you need to, give a nonverbal prompt to get back to work.

Sometimes this actually works. Chalk it up to finesse and luck. But, if the student wants to up the ante, all he or she has to say is,

Insult

There are a limited number of topics that students can use for insults. The main ones are:

- Dress

  "Say, where did you get that tie, Mr. Jones? Goodwill?"

  "Hey, Mr. Mickelson, is that the only sport coat you own?"

- Grooming

  "Hey, Mr. Gibson, you have hairs growing out of your nose. Did you know that?"

  "Whooa, Mrs. Wilson! You have dark roots! I didn't know you bleached your hair. Ha ha ha."

- Hygiene

  "Hey, don't get so close. You smell like garlic.

  "Hey, Mrs. Phillips, your breath is worse than my dog's!"

Are you ready to ring the kid's neck yet? That is the point, after all. Take two relaxing breaths, check your jaw, and stay down. The kid will run out of gas sooner or later.

When the sniggering dies down, the kid is still on the hook. If you are in your cortex, you can make a plan. Right now I am not so much concerned with your plan as I am with the fact that you are in your cortex.

Profanity

There are a limited number of swear words that students can use in the classroom. Chances are, you are familiar with all of them. There are your everyday vulgarisms, and then there are your "biggies."

Now, ask yourself, what is the real agenda underlying this vulgarity? As always, it has to do with *power*. Naturally, the question of power boils down to a question of *control*. Who controls the classroom? This in turn boils down to the question of who controls *you*.

Can a four-letter monosyllable control *you* and determine your emotions and your behavior? If so, then the student possesses a great deal of power packaged in the form of a single word.

Relax, tune out, and make the student do all of the work.

If you give a student this much power, it will be used. And, if control comes quickly and predictably, the student will probably use it again and again.

Responding to Nasty Backtalk

To understand the management of backtalk, and especially nasty backtalk, you must conceptualize your response in terms of *two* time frames, *short-term* and *long-term.* The short-term time frame is *very* short; two or three seconds.

Short-Term Response

The correct short-term response, as you might imagine, has to do with the fight-flight reflex. Take two relaxing breaths, remain quiet, and deliver some withering boredom.

If you are in your cortex, you can use good judgement and choose a long-term response that fits the situation. If, however, you are in your brainstem, judgement is out of the question. Consequently, if you succeed in the short-term, you will probably succeed in the long-term. But, if you fail in the short-term, all is lost.

Your *lack* of an immediate response is very powerful body language. It tells the student, among other things, that you are no rookie. You have heard it all a thousand times.

If the student runs out of gas and takes refuge in getting back to work, you have "finessed" the incident (and gotten somewhat lucky). Count your blessings, and consider getting on with the lesson. You can always talk to the student after class.

It is hard for students to blame anyone else when they are the only ones 'out of line.'

Do not worry that students will think, "Mr. Jones didn't do anything about Larry's profanity." Give them some credit for social intelligence. They just saw Larry try "the big one" and fail. They saw you handle it like an old pro. And they learned that profanity is useless in this classroom as a tool for getting the best of the teacher.

They will certainly know that profanity is not taken lightly when, on the way out of class, you say, "Larry, I would like to speak with you for a moment." Of course, you need to be standing in the doorway when you say this.

Long-Term Response

Your short-term response does not foreclose any management options. It simply gives you time to think while avoiding the Cardinal Error.

In the long-term, you can do whatever you think is appropriate. You know what options are available to you at your school site. If in your opinion the student should be sent to the office, then *do it.*

Whatever you choose to do, if you are calm, your actions come across with an air of cool professionalism. You are above the storm. This calm helps students accept responsibility for their own actions. It is hard for students to blame anyone else when they are the only ones "out of line."

The Clinical Dimension

Imagine a situation in which a student says some ugly things in the middle of class, and you finesse the situation

Chapter Twenty Two

Turning Problem Students Around

What about Larry?

The Confrontation

Imagine a Hurry-up Bonus in which all of the students but Larry are in their seats ready to begin as the time runs out. You point to the clock and say,

> "Class, you are on your own time now."

Larry turns to you and blurts,

> "This whole thing is stupid! PAT is stupid too! This sucks!"

Do you have a student in your class who might respond in this way? If so, you have a lot of company.

Who Is Larry?

Before we make a plan for dealing with the confrontation, let's take a moment to think about Larry. Is Larry a happy child? Is Larry a popular child?

Hardly! What kind of kid would say to the class, in effect,

> "I have the power to hurt everyone in the class by ruining PAT, and I am going to do it"?

Typically, Larry is angry and alienated. He takes it out on you, and he takes it out on his classmates. He does hurtful things, and he is often a bully. As a result, he tends to be unpopular with his classmates.

Preview

- Omission Training supplies problem students with an incentive for self-control by providing a reinforcer when they refrain from a behavior for an interval of time.
- Omission Training mated with Responsibility Training gives the teacher a powerful and flexible means of motivating the peer group to help the student with individual needs.
- If the student on Omission Training refrains from the problem behavior for a given amount of time, he or she earns bonus PAT for the group.
- Omission Training typically eliminates the problem behavior rapidly while making a hero out of an unpopular student.
- Omission Training is easy to use since it amounts to nothing more than a bonus clause added to Responsibility Training.

Would Larry like to be popular? Show me a child who would not.

Yet the anger gets in the way. He does not seem to know how to be popular. He keeps doing things that seem calculated to make the other students dislike him. He is his own worst enemy.

Your Immediate Response

Take a relaxing breath. Turn in a regal fashion. Take another relaxing breath. Give yourself a moment to think. Your demeanor signals to everyone that this is serious.

Walk slowly to Larry, and wait for a moment before saying anything. Allow your own calm to help Larry relax. What you then say is not what Larry expected to hear.

> "Larry, if you think PAT is stupid, we may as well forget it. I would not expect you to work for something that you did not want. I know I wouldn't."

Larry was expecting much worse. Usually he signals relief by saying something inconsequential like, "Right."

It would seem that Larry does not value PAT as an incentive. The fact that you know better is beside the point for the moment.

Rather than being a "tactic," your words simply acknowledge the realities of the situation. You cannot make students like PAT any more than you can force them to cooperate.

Your Plan

If you can finesse the short-term situation, do so. If you stay calm and wait, Larry may take his seat for a lack of anything better to do. You can talk to Larry later.

Of course, you cannot guarantee the outcome of any situation. If Larry chooses to escalate, you will probably end up using your Backup System.

Let's assume for the moment that you successfully finesse the immediate situation. Before the day is over you must have a heart-to-heart talk with Larry. During this talk, you will implement Omission Training.

Omission Training

The general name given to an incentive system that *decreases* the rate of a behavior is *Omission Training*.

Omission Training

Incentives to Eliminate Behavior

As described earlier in the book, the basic strategy that underlies behavior management is quite simple. *Increase* the behaviors that you *do* want, and *decrease* the behaviors that you *do not* want. If you can do this, sooner or later you will be left with what you want.

Not too surprisingly, therefore, there are two basic kinds of incentive systems. One kind *increases* the rate of a behavior, and the other kind *decreases* the rate of a behavior. The vast majority of incentive systems used in classroom management, including Responsibility Training, are of the first kind. Yet, incentives to decrease behavior can be very helpful, especially when dealing with severe or chronic behavior problems.

The general name given to an incentive system that *decreases* the rate of a behavior is *Omission Training*. Omission Training has a unique structure.

The Structure of Omission Training

The structure of Omission Training is dictated by the simple fact that you cannot reinforce the *non*-occurrence of a behavior. It would sound stupid if you tried:

"I like the way you did not just hit him."

The recipient of this compliment might well conclude that you were losing it.

You can, however, reinforce someone for not doing something *for a given length of time.* You could, for example, reinforce a student for going *ten minutes* without interrupting or for going *twenty minutes* without getting out of his or her seat or for going *an entire class period* without hitting.

Omission Training plus Responsibility Training

While Omission Training is useful in providing a means other than the Backup System for eliminating problem behaviors, it becomes especially powerful when mated with Responsibility Training. This combination of management programs mobilizes the peer group to help both the teacher and the student with special needs.

For example, you could give the group a minute of bonus PAT if Larry could go ten minutes without making an inappropriate remark. This gives the peer group a vested interest in supporting Larry's efforts and ignoring his provocations. Cheers typically erupt as the PAT is posted on the board.

A Vested Interest in Helping

While Omission Training is useful for eliminating problem behaviors, it becomes especially powerful when mated with Responsibility Training. This combination gives the peer group a vested interest in supporting Larry's efforts to improve while ignoring his provocations.

As you can see, Omission Training within a group context goes beyond simply changing a behavior. It makes Larry a hero with you as his cheerleader. And, it gives you "the power of the peer group" while involving the class in helping a child they usually dislike.

In addition to helping Larry, you can also reinforce the *entire class* for omitting a behavior. You could, for example, give the group a minute of bonus PAT if *no one* interrupted for a given amount of time. This can help you deal with a problem behavior that is brief but scattered, and, therefore, difficult to deal with using Limit Setting.

The Heart-to-Heart Talk

Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted for the next twenty minutes. Heart-to-heart talks usually require plenty of "wait time." Of course, you will impart your own style to this conversation. The following dialogue is only intended to map out the terrain. The heart-to-heart talk has four parts.

Enough Is Enough

"Larry, that scene in front of the classroom this morning in which you told me that PAT was stupid – that is what we call in education 'unacceptable behavior.' And I will make you a promise: if one of us has to go, it will be you.

"Right now, we are looking at the Backup System. As I explained on the third day of school, it goes from a verbal warning to the state penitentiary and everything in between. Its purpose is to raise the price of a behavior so high that you are no longer willing to pay for it. It is not supposed to be fun.

"Between where we stand right now and the Backup System lies another option. It is a lot more enjoyable than the Backup System.

"Let me explain it to you. Then, if you want to do it, we will. And, if you don't, we won't."