

Chapter Three

Working the Crowd

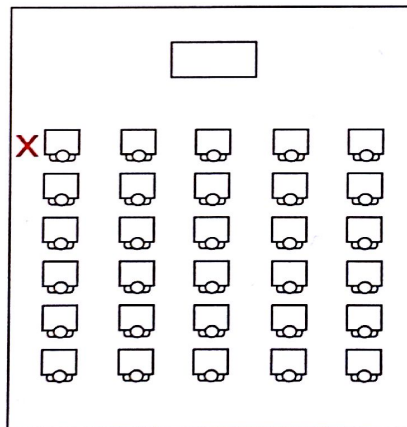
Physical Proximity

Where Does Goofing Off Start?

I'll bet you already know the most important single fact about the management of goofing off in the classroom. After all, you spent the whole first part of your life calculating the odds.

Look at the diagram to the right – a typical classroom with the teacher's desk in the front. The "X" marks the spot where the teacher is standing helping a student who is stuck. Imagine you are that teacher.

Now, place your finger on the spot in the classroom where goofing off is most likely to begin.



Preview

- The most basic factor that governs the likelihood of students goofing off in the classroom is their physical distance from the teacher's body.
- Effective teachers work the crowd. They know that "either you work the crowd, or the crowd works you."
- By using mobility and proximity as tools of management, teachers constantly disrupt the students' impulse to be disruptive.
- Since these teachers are typically supervising the students' work as they move about the room, they get discipline management for free.
- Working the crowd provides the perfect camouflage for setting limits on disruptions. Since teachers move continually among the students, they can move close to the disruptive students without embarrassing them in front of their peer group.

You Know How It Works

Chances are, you put your finger on the corner of the room that is farthest from the teacher. You've played the game. You know how it works.

When the teacher is standing near you, you cool it. If you are not working, you at least make it *look* as though you are working. But, when the teacher is on the far side of the room, well, that is a different story.

The most basic factor that governs the likelihood of your goofing off in the classroom is your *physical distance from the teacher*. The closer the teacher is, the *less* likely you are to goof off. The farther away the teacher is, the *more* likely you are to goof off.

Proximity and Mobility**Watching Natural Teachers**

When you watch natural teachers, you do not see very many things that you would label as "management techniques." Rather, you see a room full of students who are busy working.

While the students work, the teacher *walks*. The teacher meanders around the classroom supervising the students' work in a most unremarkable fashion.

If you were to ask a naive observer what the teacher was doing, the answer would probably be, "*Nothing*." The observers might occasionally see the teacher lean over to help a student. But typically it looks as though the teacher is just "cruising" around. Only after you watch a lot of

classrooms and note the differences between the effective and ineffective teachers does the importance of this cruising become apparent.

Crowd Control

Once a discipline problem occurs, management cannot be truly cheap. When a problem occurs, you must stop and deal with the problem or declare "open season" on yourself. If you stop and deal with the problem, it will take time and energy, and it will pull you away from instruction.

Consequently, before we get into complicated discipline management techniques, think in *simple* terms. In a classroom there are roughly 30 students. That is a *crowd*. The most basic level of discipline management is *crowd control*.

Crowd control does not create a perfect classroom. Rather, crowd control gets *most* of the students to do *most* of what they are supposed to be doing *most* of the time. If teachers can get most of the management they need cheaply through crowd control, they can then afford to give their undivided attention to the few problems that are left over.

Working the Crowd

The most basic technique of crowd control is called "working the crowd." Anyone who earns a living in front of a crowd will come to understand working the crowd. Singers, comedians, teachers and preachers – they all work the crowd. They know that *either you work the crowd, or the crowd works you*.

Either you
work the crowd,
or the crowd
works you.

Entertainers will work the crowd with *movement, eye contact* and *energy*. If they feel that they are losing part of the room, they will work that area all the harder.

If, for example, people at a table are talking instead of paying attention, performers will direct everything to that table until they have eye contact. Thereafter, they will focus on that table as often as necessary to keep from losing it. If they were to allow that table to “slip away,” they might lose the table next to it and perhaps the table next to it as well. Soon they would be playing to the backs of people’s heads over the din of conversation.

Natural teachers instinctively work the crowd. They have an innate sense of being “in contact” with the students. They use the proximity of their bodies as an instrument of management. They *move*.

Calculating the Odds

All students have computers in their brains dedicated to answering the question,

Is the coast clear?

Psychological Distance

Zones of Proximity

Think of every student in the classroom as having a computer whirring in the back of his or her brain dedicated to answering one simple question, “*Is the coast clear?*” This computer is operating at all times, even though it may not be at a conscious level. It calculates such things as how far away the teacher is, which direction the teacher is facing, and whether the teacher is preoccupied.

Next, imagine a teacher walking among the students. Picture three *zones of proximity* surrounding the teacher’s body in concentric circles. We will use the colors of a stoplight to represent these three zones: *red, yellow* and *green*.

- **Red:** The *red* zone is a circular area around the teacher roughly eight feet in radius. Using the stoplight as our analogy, *red* means *stop*.

Students in the red zone cool it. Their computer says, “Goofing off now would be really stupid. You would get nailed.” Very few problems occur in the red zone.

- **Yellow:** Outside of the red zone is the *yellow* zone. The yellow zone extends another six feet in every direction. *Yellow* signals *caution*.

In the yellow zone students act much the way students in the red zone act – as long as the teacher is facing in their direction. But if the teacher should become distracted by helping a student for a little too long, especially if the teacher’s back is turned, the computer says, “*The coast is clear.*” Suddenly a part of the student’s brain wakes up – the part that likes to goof off.

- **Green:** Outside of the yellow zone lies the *green* zone – *green* as in *go!* When students in the green zone look up to see that the teacher is on the far side of the room, particularly if the teacher is preoccupied, the little computer in the back of the brain gets excited and says, “*Why not?*”

Students in the green zone, however, do not start goofing off immediately. They need a little time to size up the situation. After they notice that the coast is clear, they need to cook up a plan and to cast an eye about for an accomplice.

The longer students are in the green zone, the more likely goofing off becomes. Imagine students in the back half of the classroom of a teacher who spends all of his or

Section Two: Exploiting Proximity

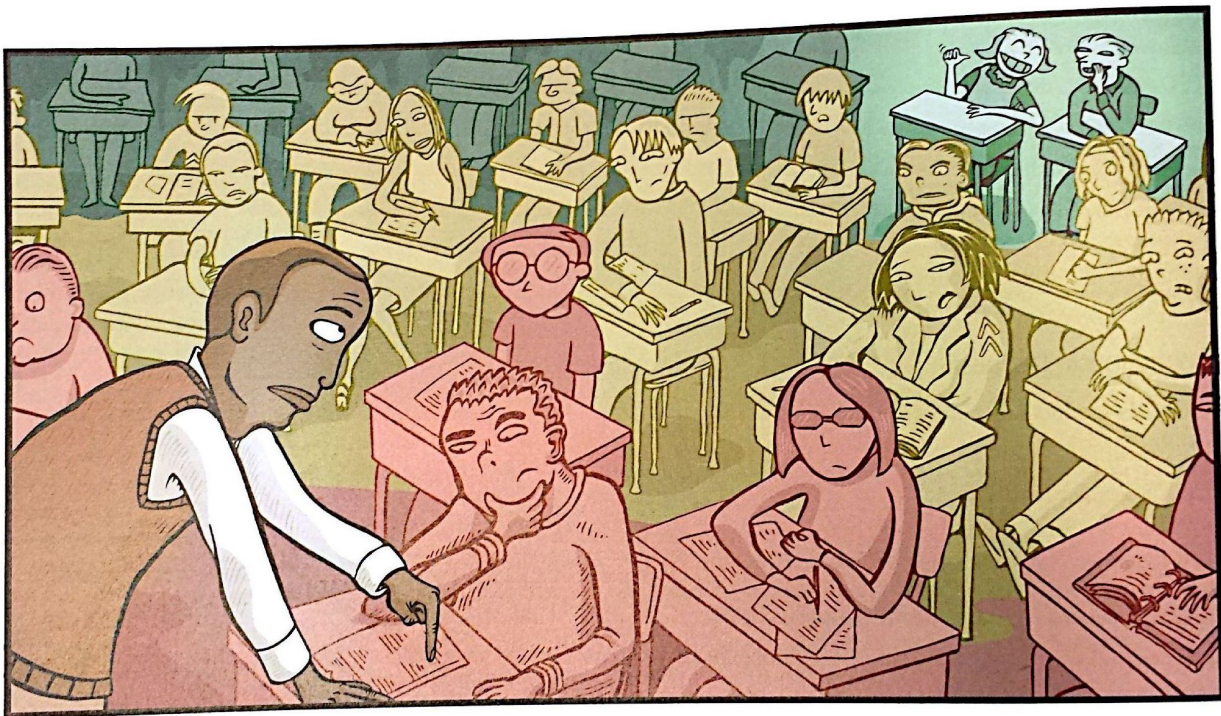
her time standing in the front. These students will spend the whole semester in the green zone. Oh my!

Disrupting Disruptions

As effective teachers work the crowd, they constantly cause the zones to change. Imagine students who look up to see that they are in the green zone. But just when their computers signal, "Coast clear," the teacher looks their way and begins to casually stroll in their direction.

"Dang!" says the computer. "I hate it when that happens! Oh, well, back to work."

When a teacher is working the crowd, two or three steps will switch a student from the green zone to the yellow zone or from the yellow zone to the red zone. Thus, through *mobility*, the teacher is constantly disrupting the students' impulse to disrupt.



Kids feel safer goofing off in the green zone.

Of course, neither the teacher nor the students monitor these calculations at a conscious level. It is *subconscious* – at the edge of awareness.

When I asked teachers who worked the crowd why they continually moved among the students, they would say, “To see how they are doing.” They would look at me as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

But I asked the question because I wanted to know whether their use of proximity to manage goofing off was conscious or instinctive. I found that it was instinctive.

So I asked the students, “What is the purpose of the teacher’s moving around the classroom while you are working?” They responded, “So I can get help if I need it.”

Only when you watch these same students in the classroom of a teacher who does *not* work the crowd, do you come to appreciate the subconscious calculations of the classroom. By the time these previously well-behaved students have been in the green zone for five minutes, they become living proof of the statement, *either you work the crowd, or the crowd works you.*

Working the Crowd from the Front

Working the Near and Far Zones

Let’s imagine that you are talking to the class from the *front* of the room. When you are in the front of the class, you work the crowd just like an entertainer would work a room in Las Vegas. You continuously move, and you direct your energy and eye contact with a purpose.

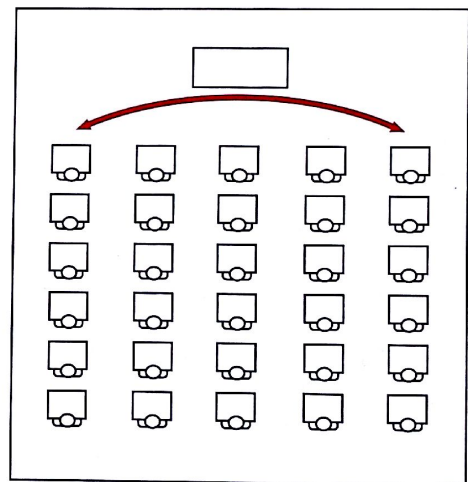
Eye contact is effective at a distance, whereas proximity is effective at close range. Since you worry about the students on the far side of the room, you will direct most of your eye contact toward the *green* zone. You will let physical proximity take care of the *red* zone.

It is best to make eye contact with *individuals* on the far side of the room. Don’t just scan an area. Make eye contact for about a second. Then, move on to another target and then another as you teach.

Interspersed between these moments of eye contact with students on the far side of the room are more fleeting “scans” of students in the red and yellow zones. Thus, while you do make eye contact with everyone in the room, most of your time and attention is directed to the far side.

As you talk, you walk. Your general pattern of movement is roughly an arc as pictured below.

This general pattern of movement accomplishes several goals simultaneously. *First*, you constantly change the zone in which a student is sitting so that no one is in the green



Even when you are in the front of the class, you move.

zone very long. *Secondly*, you constantly change everyone's visual field by forcing them to watch a moving target. If you stand still, you create a stationary target, a "talking head," and the brain "zones out" in a matter of seconds. *Finally*, you provide yourself with *camouflage* should you need to set limits on a student who is goofing off.

Camouflage for Setting Limits

Camouflage is an important concept when dealing with students who are goofing off. You want to get them back on task, but you do not want to embarrass them in front of the group. Your normal pattern of movement creates the perfect camouflage needed to "work" individual students without it being blatant.

Imagine, for example, that you catch two students goofing off on the far side of the room. These students suddenly become the two most important people in the room.

Of course, you could stop and ask the students to get back to work. This would be about as subtle as an entertainer stopping in the middle of a song and saying to the patrons of the lounge, "Group, I am simply going to wait until I have your undivided attention."

Rather than embarrassing the student, you can use *finesse*. Without breaking your train of thought as you talk to the group, turn toward the whisperers and move slowly toward them. Typically they will notice you because students keep an eye on the teacher when goofing off.

You now have eye contact with the disruptors. Talk directly to them as you stroll a step or two in their direction. Then, pause and half turn as you continue addressing the group as though nothing special were happening. This is your normal pattern of moving, pausing, and scanning. Repeat this process until you are addressing the group while standing near the disruptors. You may want to stand near them a little longer than usual. A knowing look might be in order.

Three Rules of Movement

- Constantly change the zones of proximity so that no one is in the green zone for very long.
- Stimulate the brain to attend by constantly changing everyone's visual field.
- Use movement as camouflage for dealing with disruptive students.

Having "disrupted the disruption," you can now begin to move away as you continue your lesson. However, when you scan toward the disruptors, make eye contact with them for that extra half-second. This reminds the students that you are still thinking about them.

To an old pro, all of this would take place with hardly a conscious thought. But when first starting out, remember that working the crowd is *work*. Think of yourself as an

Australian sheepdog that must constantly keep its charges from wandering off.

Working Inside the Crowd

Mixing with the Audience

While teachers can work the crowd from the front of the room, they can work the crowd more intimately if they place themselves among the students. Even entertainers will move off stage to mingle with the audience if they want more intense contact.

I have often seen good teachers walk among the students while they explain a concept or act out a part, gesturing dramatically as students watch wide-eyed. You can read a story as you cruise among the desks. You can facilitate a discussion as you move. If you need to write periodically on the chalkboard or overhead, you can do so and then work the crowd as you explain your point.

During Guided Practice

The most frequent occasion for a teacher to move among the students is during Guided Practice. Working the crowd enables the teacher to supervise students as they work on an assignment.

Teachers who work the crowd in this fashion cannot imagine *not* doing it. They say, "How else would you know what the students are doing? You have to check their work, especially at the beginning of an assignment, or they could do it all wrong, and you would never know."

These teachers are "monitoring and adjusting" while getting discipline management for free. You might wonder why any teacher would *not* work the crowd. Yet, most do not.

Obstacles to Working the Crowd

When something that is as sensible and beneficial as working the crowd fails to happen, there has to be a reason. Something must be blocking common sense. The most common reasons are:

- **Years of Modeling**

My junior high, high school, and college teachers all lectured from the front of the room. Yours probably did too. When you entered teaching you had over a *decade* of modeling that predisposed you toward teaching from the front. Without it being conscious, this reservoir of experience defines both your expectations and your comfort zone. To overcome this pattern requires a conscious commitment.

- **The Overhead Projector**

Another common factor that inhibits working the crowd is the *overhead projector*. Rarely do teachers who are using an overhead get more than three steps away from it. It is as though they were tethered to the machine. They take a step or two while making a remark to the class, and then they head back to the projector to make their next point.

One simple way of using an overhead projector while working the crowd is to quit doing all of the work yourself. Let one of your students write on the transparency. Make it a privilege. Assign a different person to do it every week.

- **The Furniture**

While the overhead projector can present a formidable barrier to working the crowd, it is not the main barrier. The main barrier to movement is the furniture. We will spend the *entire* next chapter dealing with that topic.

Body Language Is Subtle

As we describe working the crowd, we are beginning to learn about body language. Body language gets much more complex as the teacher attempts to remediate disruptions that are already in progress. In subsequent chapters on Meaning Business, for example, we will learn how to deal with even those disruptions that escalate into back talk and beyond.

Yet, the simple interactions described in this chapter reveal a key characteristic of body language in discipline management. Body language allows the teacher to use *finesse* to *protect* students from embarrassment while dealing effectively with their goofing off. If you protect students, they will cut you some slack. But, if you embarrass them, they will get revenge.