

Chapter Eleven

Succeeding from Day One

A Quick Start

Scoping You Out

Let's imagine that it is the first day of your teaching career. You are as green as grass.

Imagine a departmentalized setting. You will begin the day a half-dozen times before the final bell. You are teaching World History in Room 101 at the local high school.

Classroom management gets off to a quick start. If first period begins at eight o'clock in the morning, the students will know how good you are at classroom management by eight o'clock. They are very astute.

However, the students will give you a 48-hour honeymoon. They gamble conservatively until they have had time to "scope you out." After the honeymoon, you will find out what the real rules in the classroom are.

Reality Is the Law

You may, of course, have rules of your own. Teachers love to tell students about their rules.

In some classrooms the teacher's desires actually become implemented, but in most classrooms they don't. Students know that words are cheap and actions are expensive. The real rules in any classroom are defined by *reality* – by what the teacher allows. So, the students watch.

Preview

- Students are astute at assessing the absence of effective structure. They can tell whether their teachers are proactive or reactive, whether they are "old pros" or rookies.
- The rules in any classroom are defined by reality - "whatever any student can get away with."
- Much of the management in a typical classroom is by default. Students fool around because the teacher has not structured anything better for them to do.
- Structure begins as the students enter the classroom.
- Well-developed routines including Bell Work, signal from the beginning that the classroom is both a work environment and a friendly, personal environment.

If, for example, you ask the class to pay attention while you are speaking, but you fail to deal effectively with side conversations, students know that paying attention is optional. If you ask the class to take turns as they speak, but you occasionally recognize a student who interrupts because he or she has a good idea, students know that they are free to cut each other off during a discussion.

Classroom rules are ultimately defined by whatever any student can get away with. So the students just watch. Everything you do is a lesson. You will have taught a half-dozen lessons by the time first period *begins*.

First Lessons

Entering the Class

Imagine that you have *thirteen* minutes before the bell rings for first period. The first student enters your classroom. You have just taught the *first* lesson of the school year: *You may enter my class however you wish.*

How does the student know this? Because, he or she just did it! Remember, your rules are defined by reality.

There was no greeting, no communication of expectations, nothing specific to do. Since you have abdicated structuring this situation, structure is left to the student.

Do not be surprised if, after the honeymoon is over, the students come rolling into your classroom joking, laughing, and pushing each other. You asked for it.

Much of the management in a typical classroom is by default. Students fool around because the teacher has not structured anything better for them to do.

A Second Student Enters

You have *twelve* minutes before the bell rings, and a second student enters the classroom. You now have *two* students in your classroom. What do you think they will do?

"Hey, Jackson, where have you been?"

"Hangin' out. I heard you were out of town."

"Naw. Just for a week. Say, I hear you're goin' out with Sharon again..."

Big surprise! They are socializing. You have just taught the *second* lesson of the school year: *After you enter my classroom, you may socialize.*

The kids have important events to catch-up on. Do *you* have anything important for them to do?

Now it is *ten* minutes before the bell rings. Eight kids are in the classroom standing around, talking, and laughing.

Now it is *five* minutes before the bell rings. Twenty kids are in the classroom standing around, talking, and laughing.

It is *one* minute before the bell rings. *Everybody* is standing around, talking, and laughing. Now that you have allowed this gab-fest to start, how will you stop it?

The Bell Rings

The eight o'clock bell rings. You just taught the *third* lesson of the school year: *Do not even think about being in your seat when the bell rings.*

Why should they worry about it? You don't. There is no routine to get the students seated and ready to work *before* the bell rings, is there? Do not expect the students to take Classroom Structure more seriously than *you* do.

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Getting Them into Their Seats

Since the students are not in their seats when the bell rings, how will you get them there?

"Class, the bell has rung. Let's all take our seats. We have a lot to cover today, so let's get started. Everybody, let's take our seats!"

The students have just observed your first *overt* act of classroom management. But what classroom management "technique" did they see? It was the most widespread management technique in the world: *Nag, nag, nag*. You have just taught the *fourth* lesson of the school year: *In order to get you to do things, I nag*.

While nagging may be the most widespread management technique in the world, it is also one of the least effective. Most students learned to tune it out before they went to kindergarten.

A Lesson about Killing Time

The students will now give you a lesson about killing time. For the record, students like *brief lessons with great big breaks in between*.

Consequently, no matter how much time you give the students for a lesson transition, it will never be long enough. If you give the students three minutes, they will need five. If you give them five minutes, they will need seven. Students know how to stretch a break by *dawdling*.

Being Proactive

Proactive people know how to get organized, and they get organized well in advance.

So, when you tell the class to take their seats, three students interpret this to mean, "Now is a good time to sharpen pencils." Where does this leave you?

"Those of you over at the pencil sharpener, please take your seats. You had plenty of time to sharpen your pencils before school. Everyone, just find a seat so we can get started."

You have just taught the *fifth* lesson of the school year: *If nagging does not work, I will nag some more*.

Giving Away the Furniture

"Everyone, just find a seat." Are you kidding? You just gave away the furniture! The *sixth* lesson of the school year is: *You may sit wherever you want*.

Now, imagine the biggest troublemaker in your class – the one who will make you question your career choice. Let's call this student Larry. Every classroom has a "Larry."

If you say, "Everyone, just find a seat." where do you think Larry will end up sitting? Larry knows that the farther he is from you, the more he can get away with. Consequently, he will end up sitting in the *back of the class* along with his buddies. That's where the goof-offs always sit if you give them the chance.

This is not looking good. Your "green" is showing. The students are rubbing their hands together thinking, "All right! In first period we get to *kick back*."

The students are rating you on your skills of classroom management, and, so far, they have not seen much *style*. They are rating you along the most basic dimension of leadership ability – *proactive* versus *reactive*.

Proactive vs. Reactive**Getting Organized**

Proactive means "active ahead of time." Proactive people are the natural teachers, the natural parents, the born leaders. They know how to get organized, and they get organized well *in advance*.

Let's imagine, for example, that you have a four-year-old and a seven-year-old, and you are planning to visit grandmother next week. She lives three hours away.

What will you do to get ready for this trip? I remember my wife, Jo Lynne, doing it. She had an entire routine.

A week before the trip she bought some coloring books and new crayons. At the grocery store that week she stocked up on apples and oranges and the makings of a picnic.

On the morning of the trip, the coloring book and crayons along with pencils and tablets went into one paper bag while pieces of apple and orange with some crackers went into another paper bag. In addition she collected some story books and games plus the Etch-a-Sketch for good measure.

The kids were occupied with their new crayons and coloring books as we backed the car out of the driveway. The snacks were given out as we rode along accompanied by praise for "behaving so nicely." In addition to the snacks, we stopped for a picnic halfway to grandmother's at our favorite roadside park that had a swing set.

Jo Lynne was in charge, and she was actively planning and organizing the trip to grandmother's well in advance. She's

no fool. She knew what the trip to grandmother's would be like without some *organization*.

But some people don't think this way. They just put the kids in the back seat and take off down the road.

Before they have gone half a mile, the big kid takes something from the little kid, the little kid lets out a shriek and grabs it back, the big kid shoves the little kid, the little kid hits the big kid (a bad idea) and the big kid whacks the little kid who starts crying.



Reactive management always sounds the same: Nag, nag, nag.

One of the parents turns around and snaps:

"I want you to stop this fighting *right now!* You sit on *your* side, and you sit on *your* side, and I want both of you to keep your *hands to yourselves!* I do not want to listen to that fussing all the way to grandmother's!"

The parents might not *want* to listen to "that fussing," but they *will*. Having no plan to prevent it, they must now live with it.

The Sound of Reactive Management

There is a pattern of speech that is endemic to reactive management. That pattern of speech is: *Nag, nag, nag.*

When you nag, you label the procedure that you have failed to train the other person to perform. For example:

"I am *sick and tired* of coming into your room and seeing your clothes *all over the floor!* Let me tell you something! I was not put on this earth to spend my life *picking up after you.*"

Have you ever heard this speech? What procedure has this parent failed to train the child to perform? How about: *Pick up after yourself. It either goes in the closet or in the hamper.*

Focus on Procedure

What sets *proactive* people apart is not their goals and objectives, but, rather, their *procedures*. Proactive people know how to organize an activity in order to get things done. Reactive people either *do not know how* to organize an activity or are *too lazy* to go to the trouble. Consequently, they must *react* to the disaster that has been created by a lack of structure.

Classroom Structure

Getting a room full of young people to do things quickly and smoothly will place the structuring of behavior on

a plane far above normal, everyday family life. In detail and precision it will exceed what you remember from your parents. Your parents, after all, were not trying to manage thirty children. And they were not trying to manage one complex activity after another all day long.

Getting accustomed to the level of structure required in the classroom is a big step for a new teacher. Chances are you have never acted or sounded like this before. You have never given yourself permission to be this "controlling."

Let's give our green teacher another crack at starting the school year. In so doing, let's take a close look at proactive management by examining a few of the routines that might be most helpful.

Starting Over Again

The Day Before

When the students show up, it is too late to be proactive. The day before school begins, stand at the front of your classroom and look around. How big is the room? Space can be your friend by giving you elbow room, or it can be your enemy by running your legs off. The first feature of the classroom that you must take responsibility for structuring in order to facilitate learning is *space*.

Room Arrangement

Where will you place the furniture? Can you get around easily? The first crucial element of Classroom Structure is room arrangement. This topic has been dealt with thoroughly in Chapter 3, "Working the Crowd" and Chapter 4 "Arranging the Room." By way of review, the biggest single variable that governs the likelihood of students goofing off in your class is their physical distance from you. *Proximity* is the name of the game.

Teachers who make classroom discipline look easy *move*. They produce proximity through mobility. They *work the*

crowd because they know that *either you work the crowd, or the crowd works you*.

The biggest obstacle to mobility is the *furniture*. You need *walkways* – nice, broad walkways so that you can move among the students easily. Room arrangement is the art of producing walkways within the normally crowded conditions of the classroom. The optimal room arrangement allows you to get from any student to any other student in the fewest steps.

One of your first jobs in structuring the classroom is to take responsibility for where the furniture goes. This may require a conference with the principal and the custodian to gain their understanding and cooperation.

Desk Creep

What do you think will happen to your lovely room arrangement when thirty students occupy those desks? Students are full of energy, and they move. They twist and turn and squirm and scoot, and their desks move with them.

The next obstacle that we must overcome in working the crowd is *desk creep*. A desk can block a walkway by creeping less than a foot.

To contain desk creep, you will need *visual markers* to show the students where the furniture goes. Furniture must be “straightened up” during each lesson transition, or the walkways will disappear. With clear visual markers, you can say during a lesson transition:

“...and after you have handed in your papers and sharpened your pencils, put your desks back on their marks before you take your seats.”

One of the cheapest visual markers is a “tape dot.” A tape dot is simply a small piece of masking tape that you tear off the end of the roll and stick on the floor. It is no

bigger than the end of your finger. Two dots where the front legs of a desk touch the floor locates the desk.

On the day before the students show up, you may be placing tape dots all over the floor after you have arranged the furniture. But rest assured that this is the *last* time *you* will ever do it. When tape dots have to be replaced due to normal wear and tear, you will have the *students* do it. It will be one of their regular classroom chores.

Sometimes administrators and custodians get apoplectic when they see tape dots suddenly appear on their newly polished or carpeted floors. This is another reason for having a preliminary conference with the interested parties. If you do not do a little team building proactively, you will get the hassles that go with reactive management.

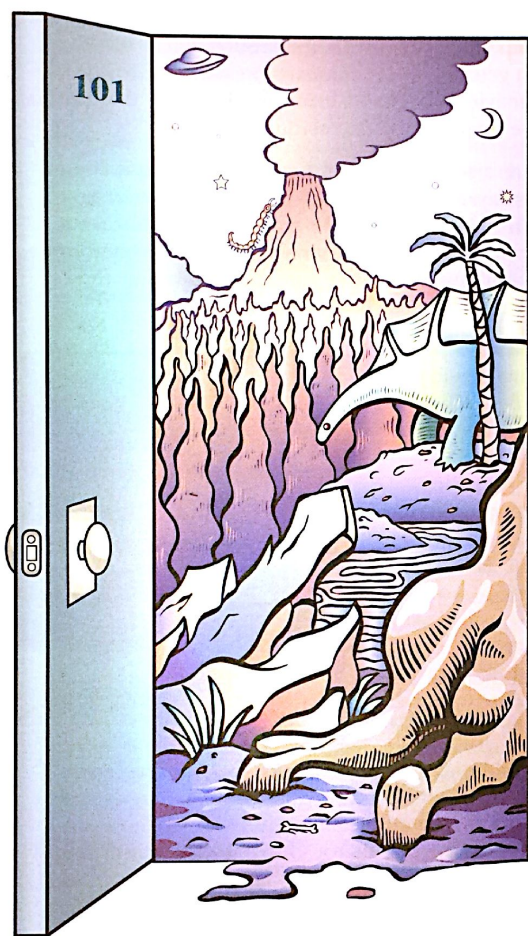
Incidentally, there are alternatives to tape dots. By fifth grade, if the teacher is using horizontal rows (see chapter 4), students can line up their desks with a few marks on the wall. I have also seen teachers use different colored dots for different room arrangements within the same classroom. The stationery store carries packages of different colored dots for pricing items at yard sales. Whatever the specific method, you will need *visual prompts* for locating the furniture.

Greet Them and Put Them to Work

Where do you stand at the beginning of the class period? Let me make a strong suggestion that you stand *in the doorway*.

In the hall, students laugh and joke and flirt as they pass from class to class. This is normal behavior for the hallway. The classroom, in contrast, is a *work* environment.

Students would love to bring their *social* environment from the hall into the classroom. They would love to spend the first part of the class period finishing their con-



Define the entrance to your classroom as a doorway between two different worlds.

versations. And they will, unless you clearly structure a change in behavior.

Do everything you can to define the doorway into your classroom as a threshold between *two different worlds*. Clearly separate the social world from the world of schoolwork.

You can only define a work environment through *work*. Stand in the doorway, greet the students warmly, and, above all else, *give them a job*.

But what job will you give them? This brings us to the topic of *Bell Work*.

Bell Work

Bell Work, as the name implies, is the schoolwork that students are doing *when the bell rings*. It is always the first task of the class period.

When you describe Bell Work to your students on the first day of school, instruct them never to ask you whether there is Bell Work today. There is Bell Work *every* day. It will always be posted on the board in the same place. Tell the students,

“As soon as you reach your seat, look at the board for today’s Bell Work, and get started.”

Bell Work, as you might imagine, is a bit of a misnomer because many students enter the class minutes before the bell rings. Say to the students,

“If you want to talk and socialize, stay out in the hall. That is what halls are for. When you are ready to work, come in.”

Bell Work consumes the first five minutes of the class period. Structuring work at the beginning of the class period eliminates a serious problem in classroom management. That problem is “settling in.”

Bell Work and "Settling In"

A typical class period is not on task until five to seven minutes *after* the bell rings. Teachers take roll, and students talk, sharpen pencils, and listen to announcements over the P.A. as they amble toward their seats. This daily ritual is called "settling in."

Settling in is so ingrained in the daily life of the classroom that few teachers regard it as a problem. It is just the normal way of starting class. But I regard it as a problem – a *big* problem.

If, for example, a class period lasts fifty minutes, and you take five minutes for settling in each day, you thereby consume *one-tenth of your total instructional time with this class period for the entire year*. That is a high price to pay for the privilege of settling in.

But, what if you try to start on time *without a plan*? When are you going to take roll? At the elementary level you don't just take roll – you collect lunch money, milk money, book club money, and money for the field trip on Friday. The district should issue you a cash register. In addition, there are announcements over the P.A. that interrupt you just as you are starting the lesson. And then a student comes in late with a note from the nurse.

The school district is not organized to start when the bell rings. That's why nobody does it. Try starting on time, and see how far you get. How many days in a row can you juggle all of the distractions listed above before you say, "Oh, forget it! Let's just settle in."

The fact of the matter is that you *do* need to take roll and collect lunch money, milk money, and so on. The question is, how can we do this without wasting the first five minutes of instruction? What you need is a meaningful learning experience that *does not require your active teaching*. You need Bell Work.

What Do You Do for Bell Work?

First, keep it simple. *Second*, make sure that it serves a purpose in getting the day's instruction started. Use it as a warm-up activity. It probably incorporates review that you would have done anyway *after* settling in.

If you are a science teacher, how about four questions from yesterday? If you are a math teacher, how about four problems from yesterday? Make them doable. This is not the midterm exam. If the students were here yesterday and were not comatose, they can start answering those questions or doing those problems.

But review is just one of many possibilities for Bell Work. Some teachers use journal writing or silent reading. Others put word games or mind benders on the board. I remember one teacher who had a student read to the class from a library book while he took roll. The sky is the limit as long as it makes sense in terms of your classroom.

Do *not* saddle yourself with an extra stack of papers to grade. Some teachers flip through Bell Work quickly and put an "X" in a column of the grade book for those students who gave it a decent try. Other teachers farm this job out to students who are on the "clerical work committee" this week. Some teachers collect the papers with due seriousness, glance over them, and then drop them into the circular file after school. After all, the purpose is to start kids thinking, not to assess performance.

Bell Work

Bell Work begins as soon as a student enters your class and continues until five minutes after the bell rings. It provides a useful learning activity while you look after the organizational chores.

Bell Work on Day One

What will you do for Bell Work on the first day of school? You will need something.

You may already have a routine that works for you. I have seen, for example, social studies teachers get off to a quick start with a political opinion survey or questionnaire. I know primary teachers who have the children draw pictures of their families, sort blocks by color, shape, and size, or assemble a puzzle.

You might also consider handing out 3-by-5 cards as you greet the students at the door. On the blank side of the card is a seat number. All of the desks have numbers taped to them. Greet the student and say:

"This is your seat number. Find your seat, then turn the card over and fill it out according to the instructions on the board."

On the board is a picture showing students how to fill out the card – name, birthday, home address, home phone number, and so on. It may sound basic, but at least you put the kids to work. And they get a message that can only be conveyed behaviorally: *When you enter the room, expect to get right to work.*

Introduce Yourself

On the first day of school the *first* question in the students' minds is, "Who are *you*?" You will introduce yourself, of course, but you might also talk about yourself a little bit.

Deal with obvious questions like, "Why are you here?" Sometimes students show surprise when you confide to them that you get great pleasure from seeing young people learn. Eyes may widen when you tell them that school should be fun. Don't beat it to death. But, a few words from the heart are in order.

Icebreakers

On the first day of school, the *second* question in the students' minds is, "Who are *they*?" If you think the students all know each other, think again.

I used to have teachers hand out a blank seating chart in mid-November and ask the students to fill in the first and last names of everyone in the class. Rarely did the number of correct papers exceed 25 percent. Teachers were typically shocked, but most had to admit that they had invested little time in making it otherwise.

Students do better in class both academically and socially when they are comfortable, relaxed, and "at home." They do not do so well in an impersonal environment.

The question facing the teacher is, "*Do you care?*" Is it worth your time in order to make the students feel at home? I would strongly suggest that you devote the lion's share of the first class period of the year to creating comfort. Spend at least a half-hour doing an "icebreaking" activity.

Many teachers feel that it is all-important to "set the tone" of the class by getting right into a meaty assignment during the first class period. While well intentioned, this objective is not aligned with the students' needs.

Think of yourself suddenly thrown together with a group of your peers, some you know and some you don't, plus a few good friends that you haven't seen in months. Some social "settling in" is needed.

If you invest time and energy in producing comfort, you signal to the students that you care about them as people. If you do not invest, you signal that they are nothing but warm bodies occupying chairs in your class. Do not expect a lot of warmth and consideration coming back to you from students who are treated in this fashion.

Since the objective of breaking the ice is social, have some fun with it. Anything that gets the students to interact with each other and laugh is golden.

Sample Icebreakers

Here are some sample icebreakers that you can use on the first day of school. Customize them to fit your needs. Your colleagues can give you even more.

Games

- **Scavenger Hunt:** Hand out a sheet of paper with ten questions about things the students are likely to have in common (the last movie you saw, your favorite sport, your favorite flavor of ice cream, how you get to school, etc.). To the right of these questions are four columns. Students write the answer to each question in column one. They must then find three students who have the same answer for each question. These students sign the sheet in one of the three remaining columns. Give the students a time limit and watch them go. Be a participant yourself. Any activity of this kind will work better when you are part of it.
- **Name Game:** In the name game, students form a circle with their desks and hang a 3-by-5 card on the front of the desk with their first name printed on it. Pass out magic markers so the names can be written in big, bold letters that can be read from across the room.

The first person begins the game by giving his or her first name plus a rhyme, an adjective, or a nickname that describes him or her. This part is always good for laughs.

The second person does the same, and then repeats what the first student said. The third person does the same, and then repeats what the second and first students said. By the time the game has gone around the

room, the person who is "it" has a lot of names and nicknames to remember, but the name cards on the front of the desks serve as reminders. Class members are directed to quickly supply missing information if a fellow student gets stuck.

As simple as it sounds, this game usually generates a lot of kidding around while it helps students associate names with faces. Of course, the teacher goes last and learns the students' names in the process.

Class Introductions

- **Partner Introductions:** Students pair up and introduce their partners. Structure the interview by providing a list of topics. Interviewers typically get specifics about their partner's favorite movie, food, activity, etc. Go around the room and have each student introduce his or her partner to the class.
- **Group Sharing:** Have each student share with the group the best thing they did over the summer, their biggest fear, their biggest hope for the new school year, and so on. You supply the list of topics.

Art and Graphics

- **Design a T-shirt:** Have each student design a T-shirt press-on that tells about him or herself. Each student then stands up to display and explain the design.
- **Photos:** If you have a digital camera and printer, take the students' pictures on the first day of school and print them on 3x6 paper. Have the students list five things that describe themselves on the bottom half of a sheet of notebook paper. Then, have the students read their lists to the group prior to your mounting their photos on the top half of the paper. Post the photo sheets around the room.

This activity can be extended throughout the first week of school by having each student bring a baby picture. Number the baby pictures and post them on

the bulletin board. Have a contest in which points are given for matching current pictures with baby pictures.

Personal Characteristics

- **Guess Who:** Hand out a sheet with ten questions about personal characteristics of the students. Have the students answer the questions and hand them in. The teacher reads the first item on a student's list, and the entire class has to guess who the person is. Additional items on the list are read until the student is identified. The rest of the students follow in turn.
- **Place in the Family:** Have students form groups according to their place in the family (oldest, middle, youngest). The students in each group list the things they have in common and the advantages and disadvantages of their place in the family. Each group makes a list and shares it with the class.

Proactive Relationship Building

First Impressions

Students will have a well-formed impression of you by the end of the first day of the school year. They will know whether your classroom is a work environment or a place to kick back. And they will feel at home in your classroom – or not.

The students can always tell what is important to you just by watching. Things that are important are worth your

time and effort. Things that are not important are either put off or dealt with in passing.

Do not worry, however, if you are already in the middle of a semester when you learn about the power of proactive relationship building. Tomorrow can always be the first day of school. Jump in and get started.

Tell your students what you are doing. They will know anyway. You might say:

"Class, you know that I went to a workshop last week. The workshop was about classroom management. I learned how to use our class time a lot more effectively.

"So, let's imagine that this is the first day of school. As you saw, I met you at the door, and I had a mind bender on the board for you to begin as soon as you got to your seats. This was an example of a Bell Work activity. Next, I would like to..."

Follow Through

Relationship building is a continuous process. But, if you want to make sure that it happens, you need to have a plan.

One simple follow through activity is "life space interviewing." Simply call students up to your desk one at a time as the rest of the class is working independently, and ask them about themselves. Ask about their families, their hobbies, their pets, and their special interests. Take notes. They will know that you care who they are, and you will have personal insights that will be invaluable as the school year progresses.

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