

Chapter Nineteen

Dealing with the Unexpected

Playing with Finesse

Adjustments

The description of Meaning Business presented up until now is both illuminating and limiting. In order to get a clear picture of the dialogue in body language between teacher and student, the flow of events in the classroom has been simplified. In real classrooms life is unpredictable.

Adjustments are part of playing any game – just as a football or basketball player must continually adjust to changes in the other team's offense or defense. The present chapter deals with some of the adjustments you may need to make with the general pattern of Meaning Business.

No Prescriptions

This book, and this section of the book in particular, is free of *prescriptions*. Most other discipline management programs are comprised of prescriptions. "If the student does *this*, you do *that*."

Instead of laying the groundwork for good decision making, prescriptions preempt decision making by dictating consequences. They actually prevent adjustments to the specifics of the moment.

Fundamentals and Basic Plays

Rather than being prescriptive, effective discipline management is dynamic. It involves the complex give-and-take that we have characterized as an indoor sport.

Preview

- Sometimes with body language you get the opposite of what you expect. You may think, *It's not working*. But body language is always "working."
- People act in a bizarre fashion for a reason. Atypical responses to *Meaning Business* can teach us a great deal about the student if we know how to read the message.
- This chapter describes variations of Limit Setting for use when *needy* students or *explosive* students do the opposite of what you expect. It also describes adjustments to Limit Setting for *group* disruptions that allow you to remain in control.
- This chapter also examines the natural limitations of body language in managing behavior. Understanding these limitations will allow us to transition seamlessly to other procedures when they are better suited to the task.

This book clarifies both the fundamentals of the game and the basic plays. During the game, however, you must react and adjust as the game unfolds. If your management system gives you an adequate range of options, and if you are in your cortex, you will probably make a good call.

Crucial choices cannot be made from the sidelines. I certainly cannot sit in my office a thousand miles away and prescribe exactly what you should do with a student I have never seen in a classroom I have never visited.

However, some anomalies are more common than others. Here are some examples of Meaning Business that are "outside of the box." Hopefully, they will serve as useful precedents when it comes time to improvise.

Proximity Triggers Clinging

The Opposite of What You Expect

It was the first week of school, and the first grade teacher was just getting to know her students. She was working the crowd as the students did an art project at their desks. One little boy, who seemed quite immature, was fooling around at his desk, off in his own little world. The teacher stood at the child's desk for a moment waiting to be noticed.

When the boy failed to look up, the teacher bent down and rested one hand on the desktop in order to give him a prompt. When the student looked up and saw the teacher's arm in front of him, he wrapped his arms around her forearm and rubbed his face against her sleeve. He continued to do this for nearly five seconds.

Sometimes in body language you get the opposite of what you expect. If you only know the basics of body language, you may think, "*It's not working.*" But body language is always "working." Sometimes, however, it produces a surprising result.

A Neon Sign

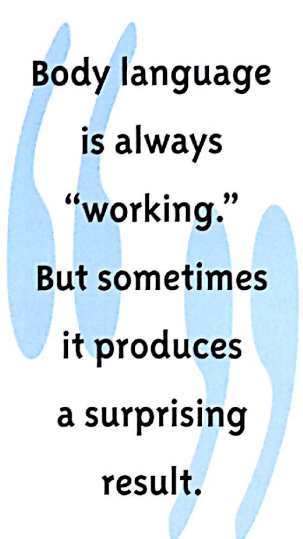
Israel Goldiamond, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, used to have a saying concerning the symptomatology of clinical disorders. He would say, "A symptom is a neon sign pointing to its own cure." To our group of young psychologists he explained, "If a person is acting in a bizarre fashion, it is for a reason. What do they get for this behavior? Whatever it is, they must want it very badly. Find out what it is, and make sure that they can only get it by acting appropriately."

Dr. Goldiamond's analysis proved unerringly true. You would do well to take it to heart.

When a child in your classroom acts in a bizarre or atypical fashion, the child is telling you a great deal about his or her life. If you can decode the message, you can understand what would otherwise seem inexplicable. And you will have the beginning of a treatment program.

Terry Cloth Mothers

When the child described above wrapped his arms around the teacher's forearm and rubbed his face on her sleeve, the image that came to mind was of baby monkeys and their terry cloth mothers. This image is embossed in



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the memory of any student who has ever taken an introductory course in psychology.

Baby monkeys who were deprived of their mothers' presence made surrogate mothers out of the softest object they could find. That object was a terry cloth towel. They would curl up on it and rub against it in an effort to derive the touch that they were being denied.

Like the baby monkeys, children who are socially deprived often seek attention and touch in ways that we might consider bizarre. As a result, they read body language differently than normal children do.

Indiscriminate Responding

To understand the behavior of the needy first-grader in our example, think of him as being "starved for attention." Starvation provides us with the perfect analogy.

Imagine yourself going to a new restaurant. Have you ever read through the entire menu two or three times before finally making your selection? This is the behavior of a well-fed person. You are *highly discriminating*.

Imagine, in contrast, that you had not eaten in a week. Someone offers you some food – the only food available – a turkey sandwich. Can you imagine yourself saying, "No, thank you. I prefer roast beef."?

To the contrary, you would probably "wolf it down" caring only that it was food. Under conditions of severe deprivation, we become *indiscriminate* consumers.

When children suffer from severe neglect, they become indiscriminate consumers of adult proximity and attention. They fail to read the nuances of body language that would signal approval ver-

sus disapproval – something that normal children do automatically. Rather, they "wolf it down" caring only that an adult is close enough to provide touch.

Dealing with Extreme Attention Seeking

When things go completely awry, it makes even the most experienced teachers feel as though they have somehow done something wrong. However, these situations are laden with information that can give us more effective ways of responding to that situation the next time.

The little boy's strange body language told us much that was sad about his life. His extreme neediness has neglect written all over it. As Dr. Goldiamond said, "People are bizarre for a reason."

Understand the reason, and you will have the beginning of a treatment program. Unfortunately, the treatment program is not always pleasant for us.

When we perceive the extreme neediness of deprived children, we instinctively want to heal them. We want to somehow give them the attention and love that they have been denied in order to make them whole. This is *magical thinking* on our part, and it can be destructive.

Since these children are so needy of human interaction, literally *any* interaction that you have with them will be *reinforcing*. Beware! It will reinforce whatever is happening at the time of the interaction.

If, for example, you were to interact with the boy described above because he was whining or crying or hitting, you would inadvertently reinforce whining or crying or hitting. The intent of your interaction is irrelevant. The fact that these children are indiscriminate consumers of your attention means that normal behavior on your part can easily function as a reinforcement error.

Meaning Business, therefore, can produce the opposite of what we would expect. Not being able to discriminate

Goldiamond's Rule

"A symptom is a neon sign pointing to its own cure."

disapproval, the child may act inappropriately *more often* in the future in order to get the proximity that comes with your limit setting.

As students get older, their attention seeking can acquire a more antisocial flavor. Yet, whether clingy or acting out, students with an extreme need for attention will probably be present in any classroom in which you teach. Rather than giving your attention to these children unconditionally, you must be *very guarded*.

Since Meaning Business can produce a paradoxical response from such children, you will need a different way of dealing with their misbehavior – one that does not rely on the physical proximity of Meaning Business. The following section of this book – Responsibility Training – will give you an alternative approach.

Explosive Students

Invading Personal Space

Meaning Business could be seen as an invasion of the student's personal space. This invasion is subtle when you lean down to give a prompt, but it is beyond subtle by the time you go to "camping out."

In previous chapters we have imagined a *typical* student. However, some students have an atypically large personal space. They go on "alert" before you even reach their desks. Put any child with a history of physical abuse into this category.

If you go to "palms" with these students, they may get extremely agitated to the point of "losing it." Your use of physical proximity has now become a liability rather than a useful tool.

Parry Reflex

Fortunately, you can usually tell when you are dealing with students who have a history of physical abuse because their body language warns you. When you get too close, they exhibit a *parry reflex*. Parry reflexes have a lot to do with children being hit.

To parry a blow is to deflect it so that it misses you. A parry reflex is a characteristic human reflex to ward off a blow to the head. Raise your arm suddenly so that your



The parry reflex wards off a blow to the head.

forearm shields your head as you duck, and you will have mimicked a parry reflex.

The beginning of the parry reflex usually consists of clenched fists and a flexing of the pectoral and shoulder muscles, particularly on the dominant side. The student's facial expression is typically grim with eyes fixed on you. If you are right-handed, you can mimic this part of the response by bringing your right elbow into your side and raising your right shoulder slightly as you tense the muscles across your chest.

While you rarely see the student's hands as you *move in* because they are under the desk, you can usually see tensing in the chest and shoulder area, especially if the student is wearing a T-shirt. This preparation to raise the arm in defense should serve as a warning to you. This student will get highly anxious if you get much closer.

Adjusting Your Proximity

You do not *need* to approach the edge of the student's desk, nor do you *need* to bend down to give a prompt, much less stay at "palms." These are choices you make.

Proximity

Any human interaction is more *intense* the closer two individuals are to each other. If the interaction needs more intensity, proximity is a good way to get it.

If, however, the intensity of the interaction is already higher than you want, you can limit intensity by limiting your proximity.

You could stand a foot away from the student's desk as you take your relaxing breath. And, you could prompt from a standing position. You could even turn your body slightly to make the interaction less confrontational.

Remember, body language is not a technique that must

be repeated in the same way every time as in a practice exercise. Rather, it is a form of communication that must be tailored to the needs of the specific situation.

Proximity is simply a tool in body language. Any human interaction is more *intense* the closer two individuals are to each other. If the interaction needs more intensity, proximity is a good way to get it. Getting a "typical student" to quit playing games and get to work is a case in point.

If, however, the intensity of the interaction is already higher than you want, you can limit intensity by limiting your proximity. Time is on your side even though less intense interactions take a little longer to get results.

Rude Surprises

Imagine that you lean down to give a young man a prompt only to have him bolt out of his chair and yell, "Get out of my face!" His chair clatters across the floor as he fixes you in his stare.

You don't always see it coming. Some students can stifle their emotions up to the last moment. A situation can sometimes blow up in your face without the warning that body language usually provides.

What do you do? Actually, this is a simple question, and, by this point in the book, you can probably give me the answer. Take two relaxing breaths, stand slowly, check your jaw, and wait. Follow the general strategy for dealing with the unexpected, *When in doubt, do nothing*. Your emotions are contagious. If you are calm, you will have a calming effect.

As you relax and wait, the young man will give himself the extra space that he needs. He will typically pace nervously as he settles down. At some point the student usually begins to feel awkward as he stands in the middle of the room with everyone watching. You may wish to reduce the awkwardness by gently motioning toward his seat.

Of course, the student could just bolt out of the room. Who can predict?

Do not feel as though you have done something wrong. Bolting and running is simply a primitive coping mechanism. The choice of coping mechanisms reveals the level of the student's social-emotional development. You have just received a lot of diagnostic information about this particular student.

Initiate the school policy for a student leaving class without permission, and continue to take your relaxing breaths. You can assess your long-term strategy in a minute.

Adjusting As You Go

No amount of experience can prevent some rude surprises during your years of teaching. The needy student and the explosive student are just two of the more predictable types that will require you to make adjustments in the heat of the moment. Here are some additional examples of improvising that will stretch our understanding of the body language of Meaning Business.

Multiple Disruptions

Sometimes when a student makes a joke or wisecrack, everybody tries to get in on the act. In seconds laughter and "smart" remarks are coming from all directions. What do you do?

This dilemma does not fit neatly into any management niche. If the banter is good-natured, which it often is, you can afford to "go with the flow." Then you might try the following gambit which is cheap, although a little unorthodox.

Before you get into setting limits, try disrupting the disruption by talking over it. Simply place your body in the middle of the action and start expounding in some intelligent-sounding way.

"What you said was pretty funny, Mark. And, it looks like the group thought so, too. But, your remark made a point. You'll remember, class, that we were talking about..., and the issue before us was... Let's go back to the point Jennifer made just a minute ago...."

By the time you have finished with this intelligent-sounding *blah, blah, blah*, you probably have everyone's attention. Having wrestled the attention away from Mark, you can then direct it to whichever topic or student you choose.

Heckling from Behind

Imagine that you are at palms with a disruptive student when you hear heckling from behind you.

"Hey, what are you picking on her for? She wasn't doing anything."

This situation may seem outrageous, but it is really just a variation on a theme. Two students are double-teaming you. The accomplice who is going two-on-one just happens to be somewhere in the room other than sitting next to the backtalker.

We described your response to being double-teamed in the previous chapter. You isolate one of the students so that you can go one-on-one. Deal with the two students in sequence, one at a time.

What Do I Do When...

In any surprise situation, the answer is always the same: *Slow down, take two relaxing breaths and remember:*

When in doubt, do nothing.

Use the same strategy with heckling from behind. Rather than responding to the heckling when it occurs, stay with the first student until you have closure, complete with "thank you" and some additional monitoring. Then, stand slowly and turn in a regal fashion toward the second student.

In most cases the second student will have already fallen silent because the strategy to "divide and conquer" failed. When you face the second student, relax and wait to see if he or she will return to work. Usually the heckler will return to work since there is nothing to be gained by upping the ante at this point. If the heckler returns to work, you can afford to simply cruise in that direction as part of working the crowd rather than "moving in" to set limits.

Repeat Disruptions

Some students are what I will call "repeaters." No matter how effectively you deal with the disruption in the short-term, they start up again as soon as your back is turned.

These kids typically come from homes in which "no" *never* means "no." Rather, the parents just nag and then go about their business without ever following through to make sure that the child did what they were told.

These children learn to simply pause for a moment until the parent turns away before resuming their activity. They cannot imagine that they have to actually *stop* what they are doing because an adult tells them to.

When you have to set limits on a student again for the same behavior within a short period of time, a warning flag should go up in your brain. When you see it for a third time, you have a pattern. Meaning Business is obviously not working. It is time to switch strategies.

Meaning Business Is Part of a System

Different Procedures for Different Jobs

Meaning Business as we have described it in the preceding chapters is only one element among many in an effective discipline management program. It is not a cure-all.

Successful classroom management will always require a system. This system must have different procedures that do different jobs. When you reach the limit of a procedure's effectiveness, you will want to transition seamlessly into a new procedure.

Beyond Meaning Business

The next section of the book is entitled Responsibility Training. Responsibility Training performs those tasks that Limit Setting is not designed to perform.

For example, our research data showed that, as soon as teachers sat down to do small group instruction, disruptions in the remainder of the class tripled as time-on-task plummeted. When you sit down, both *working the crowd* and *limit setting* are "out the window." To manage this situation you will need Responsibility Training.

Here's another management dilemma. How do you train students to be ready to start class when the bell rings and to hustle during lesson transitions? These two things could save you ten minutes of learning time per class period. Once again, you will need Responsibility Training.

Responsibility Training might well be regarded as more central to discipline management than even Limit Setting. When you train students to be responsible, they learn to manage themselves. Isn't that our real objective? Besides, it's cheaper. When students manage themselves, you don't have to do it for them.