



The Middle Man – February 2008

By using the golden rule, you can salvage friendships with parents.

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by Mark Terry

“I’m not sure you know just who I am,” says the gentleman in your office. But you know exactly who he and his wife are. He is a leader in the business community and she owns a hugely successful shop downtown. Both are actively involved in volunteer organizations in the community and are “universally loved.” Each of them sits on influential boards in your city, including the one for your own place of worship. The generous donation they personally gave to your school is the reason you have a robotics program in your science lab. Their children have attended your school, including their last child, who will be with you for two more years.

Yes, you know who they are—and you are currently engaged in an unpleasant conversation with them because they are angry with Johnny’s teacher. The teacher had the audacity to assign Johnny a grade of 88 on his project, instead of a 90. They want the grade changed or they want a new teacher, neither of which you are inclined to approve. What happens now?

When Parents Make Demands

As principals, we have all had unpleasant conversations with parents. These conversations can relate to a child’s grade that a parent believes to be undeserved, a sticky discipline situation, anger at a teacher or another student, or a traffic lane in front of the school that moves too slowly. As a result, parents who might be the most influential, powerful, and at any other times, supportive in the school district might demand a decision from you that is not in the best interest of their child or the school.

As principal of Eubanks Intermediate School in Southlake Texas, I have learned that I can maintain relationships with parents while still making autonomous decisions about their children’s schooling. For example, recently while at a district meeting, I realized that I had denied requests from many of the parents who were in attendance. These folks had been to my office regarding the most important people in their lives—their kids! Yet I still considered most as friends. How is it possible that I have been able to maintain friendships with people who have been red-faced, irate, and hostile toward me in the past?

Abide by the Golden Rule

It is my feeling that the reason you and I, as principals, can say, “No,” and still keep our standing is because of the *manner* in which we speak with parents. I believe effective principals:

- Are calm in the face of hostility;
- Listen intently and carefully;
- Are honest in their assessment of situations;
- Refrain from reacting in a defensive manner;
- Have the best interest of kids and their school at heart;
- Admit errors and mistakes;
- Maintain an ethical manner at all times;
- Make tough decisions;
- Are aware of body language;
- Know when to be silent; and
- Maintain a friendly manner after a decision has been made regardless of parents’ reactions.

As a young assistant principal, I had the amazing ability to make snap decisions that angered parents greatly. One conversation I had with a parent ended particularly badly. The parent stormed out of my office and straight into the principal’s office. After about an hour, the parent and principal came out of the office smiling and happy. When the parent left I asked

the principal what to do, thinking that he had reversed my decision. He told me, “Mark, I gave them the same answer. That was the last two minutes of the meeting. The first 58 minutes I listened and showed that I cared for their son. Always give them the first 58 before you take the last two.”

He was right! Show you care, listen, be thoughtful, be principled, stick to your core beliefs regarding what is best for kids and for the school. Live “the golden rule,” treating others as you would want them to treat you. It is sometimes hard to do, but it works. Recently, I was in a hardware store and saw a parent who had angrily stomped out of my office the week before. I greeted him and asked how he and his daughter were doing, and I asked him to drop by and see me soon. My wife inquired how I could be so friendly when the parent had been so rude to me previously. I recognized that his behavior did not determine how I felt or acted. I also understood that one day we’d both have a better relationship even though I had to tell him, “No.”

I’d love to hear about ways that you effectively make principled decisions under difficult circumstances.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Terry". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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