Are Your Colleagues Driving You Crazy?

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

Most teachers focus their energies on their relationships with their students, as well as the staff. A good working relationship with the kids is essential to successful teaching. But sometimes this focus leaves us feeling isolated in the day-to-day crunch of classroom details and responsibilities. Eventually each of us finally realizes that we are a part of a school community that extends beyond the boundaries of our individual classrooms.

Every school’s adult community has complex relationships, power structures and traditions. Imagine the new teacher Ms. Murphy received, when she sat down in the lounge at lunchtime on the first day of school and was greeted by an amused silence by the rest of the staff. Before she could open her mouth, Miss Claiborne walked in, glared at her and said, “That has been my seat since I arrived at this school 18 years ago!”

While the “personality” of any staff is dynamic, changing with the influences of new people and new situations, interpersonal success within the group will certainly be affected by anyone’s ability to function—at least at first—within the established and accepted structures. Ms. Murphy could easily have become defensive, embarrassed or indifferent. However on the occasion I witnessed, her main objective was, apparently, to simply enjoy her lunch, so she deferred to Miss Claiborne’s objections, apologizing cheerfully for unintentionally tampering with tradition.

Adult Relationships

Getting students to cooperate requires different skills from those required for generating cooperation from peers and administrators. In the student-teacher relationship, the teacher is responsible for establishing the classroom’s emotional climate, setting the criteria for acceptable behavior, and choosing behaviors that will make cooperation from the students that much more likely.

Peer relationships, even those where one adult has more power, aren’t nearly as clear-cut. Teachers are generally not held responsible for the behavior of other teachers. Even though the support—or lack of support—from another staff member can seriously affect a teacher’s performance, the ultimate responsibility for that teacher’s performance is his or her own.

Not knowing when and how to react to the behavior of another adult in the building can create feelings of frustration, helplessness or self-righteousness. For example, do you have the right to complain to the teacher who appears to be ignoring the needs of her low-achieving students? What about the teacher next door whose class is so noisy that your kids can barely think? What about the fact that your room heater doesn’t work and nobody seems to be listening? What about teachers who are having problems with other teachers or with your administrators? What about the administrator who keeps bugging you?

With all the attention and energy students require, it’s easy to lose sight of how much your relationships with other adults can affect you. Yet conflicts with other staff can interfere with your ability to function, and often, teacher stress and burnout involves interactions with other adults.

Consider Mr. Brickman, who is angry at Mrs. Lester. He tells Ms. Lopez. He complains to Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Chaney. He mentions it to the principal, the custodian, his wife and the dog. He tells everyone except Mrs. Lester. Complaining does not solve his problem. It may even compound whatever was wrong in the first place, especially if it gets back to Mrs. Lester.

Complaining rather than confronting may seem like a simpler solution, but it tends to ultimately perpetuate, if not compound conflict. Going to someone else, rather than addressing the person directly involved, may be driven by a secret hope that this “someone else” will solve the problem for us. Some people avoid communicating because it’s easier to smugly assume they shouldn’t have to (“He should have known!”) or for fear of the anger, disapproval or alienation that might result. Often, people shy away from direct communications because they don’t believe they have the power to change anything.

Interactive success does not mean that you never have any problems with people, but it does mean that you believe you have the power to influence your life—and the quality of the relationships with the people in your life. This is not a belief in power over people, nor a belief that you can “make” people do what you want, but rather, a sense that you have options, choices for your own behavior in any situation you encounter. While these choices may not get you what you want immediately, they certainly improve the odds of your having successful and fulfilling relationships. Better still, your awareness of choice will prevent you from feeling helpless or victimized!

None of Your Business

It’s easy to allow classroom attitudes, where most things are your business, to become school attitudes, where many things aren’t. Wherever you teach, you will undoubtedly run into people...
who work differently from you, people who have different values and priorities. While using the same lesson plan twice may be absolutely unthinkable for one teacher, another may swear by the successes she’s had with hers and can’t imagine reinventing that particular wheel. Normally, these two teachers can teach side by side and not affect one another in any way.

Knowing another teacher’s approach isn’t working—even when they know their approach isn’t working—is not an invitation for you to interfere. For the most part, the only time your unsolicited intervention is called for is when someone else’s behavior actually endangers someone or keeps your approach from working.

For example, Mrs. Jackson prefers a quiet classroom. She feels that she—and her students—can accomplish more if the noise level stays in the silent-to-lowhum range. Ms. Stevenson’s class has its quiet times but tends to function well at a much more active and noisy level. While Mrs. Jackson knows she wouldn’t last 10 minutes in Ms. Stevenson’s classroom, at what point does she have the right to intervene?

If the two classes are so close that Ms. Stevenson’s teaching style interferes with Mrs. Jackson’s, then by all means some discussion is called for. But if Ms. Stevenson’s class is located at the other end of the hall or in another building, or manages to keep it’s noisy activities confined to the times that Mrs. Jackson’s class is in another class or at lunch, then any comments Mrs. Jackson makes are inappropriate. Such judgments and unsolicited criticism are a sure-fire way to add stress to whatever relationship these two teachers may have.

When you are feeling critical of another person’s teaching, or of the personality traits and habits they bring into the classroom, a key question to ask yourself is: “How is this behavior a problem for me?”

Chances are, you may find that the behavior isn’t really interfering with your work—it may just be getting on your nerves. There’s a big difference! Behaviors that interfere with your ability to perform as a teacher are real problems that need to be handled. Everything else is either a problem between other people or just a difference in values. Learning to respect these differences can go a long way in building understanding, mutual respect and positive relationships with colleagues.

Additionally, boundaries can get kind of fuzzy when we see two colleagues in conflict with each other, know a teacher who is having problems with an unreasonable principal, or work with someone who can’t quite get it together. Teachers are born helpers. The need or desire to “make it better” may be so inherent in the teaching profession that we sometimes have difficulty drawing the line between what concerns us and what doesn’t; our desire to help may engage us in another person’s problem almost by accident. But remember that the best help is often letting people solve their own problems. If you are asked to help, and you choose to do so, be careful that your helping does not become a bigger problem for you or them.

You can be caring, concerned and supportive of another teacher and still recognize where this responsibility begins and ends. Listening, accepting, acknowledging, modeling, providing information and materials, or helping that person think through possible solutions, for example, can be valuable strategies that can help that person and also forge a bond in your own support network. Offers like, “I can take Wilbur for a while, if you’d like,” “Can I give you a hand?” or “I’ve got some neat dinosaur games if you could use them in this center,” will probably not be perceived as an attack or a criticism. Nonetheless, use your judgment. Even the most well-meaning offer of help can provoke defensiveness or offense if it is perceived as invasive, unnecessary or judgmental.

The cost of unsolicited intervention—particularly in the form of “shoulds” or criticisms—can be high. If you have decided that the behavior is not interfering with your teaching, but that it still is driving you crazy, you may want to examine why you’re having such a hard time with how someone else is acting. At the very least, think ahead to what might happen if you go ahead and share your opinion. Is the payoff worth the price?

Every teacher has an idea of what good teaching is all about, and it’s easy to evaluate others in terms of these values and criteria. Mrs. Garfield seems to favor some children. Mr. Thompson spends too much time lecturing. Mr. Bender never smiles. Ms. Green is two chapters behind the other fourth grade teachers. These behaviors may spark your disapproval, but they are also out of your control and... none of your business.

When it is Your Business

Certainly, the best way to resolve a problem is to prevent it from ever occurring in the first place. Suppose you and Mrs. Garfield are going to combine your classes for a special project. You tell her that it’s very important to you that everyone in the class has a chance to share opportunities, materials and responsibilities. She may think twice before she assigns particular jobs to favored children. But even if your request makes absolutely no dent in her behavior, you have grounds for an objection or reminder at a later point. At worst, you have the privilege of knowing that you have done the very best you can do with what you can control—that is, your own behavior.

Likewise, giving your colleagues a schedule of times you would like to use a particular piece of equipment if it doesn’t conflict with their schedules, or asking your next-door neighbor when would be the best time for you to schedule a particular noisy activity, can help you avoid a conflict that may arise from assuming either that no one else has conflicting needs or that no one cares.

The bottom line for problem solving—and prevention—is continually thinking in terms of the following question: “How can we both (or all) have our needs met?” Gathering and giving information ahead of time will help the other person avoid operating on assumptions or false (or unreasonable) expectations, and conveys a sense of consideration for them in the context of your needs.

Selling an Idea

Sooner or later, every teacher has an objective that requires the consent, support or cooperation of some or all of the adults in the building. The ease with which an idea is accepted will depend on a number of elements, including history and tradition. Pulling off a field trip will be much more difficult if you are the first teacher in the history of the school to propose one. Or your suggestion for a school-wide winter holiday pageant may meet with resistance simply because the program has always been put on by fifth graders alone. Funding priorities may be another obstacle, no
You can confront Mrs. Benson and demand that she shut off the video immediately. After all, you have the schedule on your side. However, this powering approach to problem solving considers only your needs and is likely to create hostility with someone who might have otherwise tried to work out the problem. Even if you get the VCR, is it worth the emotional strain and future alienation?

The fear of making a scene—or an enemy—can lead to another win-lose scenario of the opposite extreme. In this case, you decide not to mention it because you believe it either won’t do any good or it will create greater problems. In the meantime, your need for the VCR falls by the wayside. That may be fine if your need to show the video is really less important than your need to avoid a potential conflict with Mrs. Benson. But what about Ms. Stevenson’s class? Canceling a video is one thing; not being able to teach over the noise in someone else’s room is another.

The “why bother” approach is effective if you can live with the consequences of not bothering. But often a victim stance masks the same self-righteousness and “how dare she” feelings that prompted a power approach, and may get rerouted into complaints to everyone but the person involved. This option is also dangerous: by choosing “why bother,” you may be subconsciously turning over responsibility for your needs to another party, either by hoping that your complaints will evoke outside intervention or cooperation through pity. Doing so will always leave you at the mercy of what other people decide for you.

There is another alternative: You actively take responsibility for meeting your own needs while considering the needs of another person. By telling Mrs. Benson, “Uh, oh. We have a problem. I signed up to use the VCR this period,” you are simply stating the nature of your problem without attacking Mrs. Benson or tripping over values or emotions. “This is my last chance to show the video before I have to send it back. Is there some way we can work this out?” gives Mrs. Benson some additional information and also allows her some input, and puts you both in a position to cooperate.

In the same way, the noise-level problem must be approached in some way that will not destroy Ms. Stevenson’s credibility as an instructor or invalidate her worth as a person. Rather than telling her what she’s doing wrong (“It’s too noisy over here” or “Your class is way too loud”), describe the problem in terms of your needs: “I’m about to give a test to my class and need a bit more quiet, please,” or “We’re having a hard time hearing the movie.”

In any conflict situation, you will almost always be served best if you start directly with the person or persons involved. Going to the principal—or worse, to another colleague—before you have approached that teacher is likely to cause resentment and confusion. Keep even the tiniest issue just between the two of you, out of earshot of other colleagues, parents or students. If the problem is chronic, find a time when nothing else is going on and talk to the person. Describe the problem in terms of your needs—not what the other person is doing wrong. In some way, recognize and acknowledge that her needs, styles, schedule or priorities are different. Ask for suggestions—not excuses—and work together toward resolution. Make clear that your goal is a solution that works for everyone.

In some instances, you will get an immediate and positive response. At other times, even the most carefully-worded, best-intended approach will be met with defensiveness, aggression or indifference. Continue to stress your desire to come to an agreement everyone can live with. Building positive relationships well before problems come up will help you arrive at satisfactory, win-win solutions when misunderstandings or problems arise.

No-Win Situations

If you have been unable to sell someone on a win-win solution and the problem still persists, the next step is to suggest arbitration. If Mrs. Benson, for whatever reason, is unwilling to help resolve the problem, it might be time to say, “I understand that the schedule was developed to avoid problems like these. Would you prefer that we work this out with the office?” Notice that this statement is not worded as a threat—you have simply presented another option.

Unfortunately, in most cases when you turn a problem over to someone, you also turn over the responsibility for a
solution. The advantage is that the third party may see things more clearly and objectively and may suggest options that occurred to neither of the involved parties. The disadvantage is that a third party may well solve the problem as quickly and conveniently as possible, with little regard to the specific needs of the involved parties. There is also the chance that the arbitrator will make things worse, so select arbitration cautiously.

Sometimes persistence can overcome a seemingly no-win situation. It may be hard to convince a voice on the telephone that you and your students need heat in order to function, but once that voice recognizes that he or she will no longer be bothered by three phone calls a day after your heater is repaired, you are much more likely to get results. Be pleasant if you choose this approach—threats rarely work in these instances.

Unfortunately, you may not be able to directly resolve every problem with another individual. This no-win situation may involve power, politics, personality or a loss of perspective that leaves all people involved unable to envision their options. In one real-life incident, a teacher we’ll call Mr. Teres was observed by Mrs. Black, the principal, when he was presenting an activity designed to reinforce a concept in the Reading program that the students hadn’t quite gotten. Mrs. Black was concerned that the activity was not presented in the way as instructed. He then came under criticism. Is there something I’m not understand? Mrs. Black responded that he was being too sensitive. When pressed to elaborate her expectations, she ended the activity, through some mediating process, may well be indicated. But in such a no-win situation, burnout or stalemating is often the result. Seeking a teaching position elsewhere is sometimes the most emotionally cost-effective option.

There will always be days when you would simply prefer to not have to deal with a certain peer or supervisor. But no matter how difficult a situation may be, your awareness of your own needs, your sensitivity to the needs of others and your willingness to solve problems creatively can work to everyone’s benefit. Additionally, your belief in your ability to impact your life and your willingness to explore the options and choices available to you will always give you the confidence that can lead to a successful outcome.

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