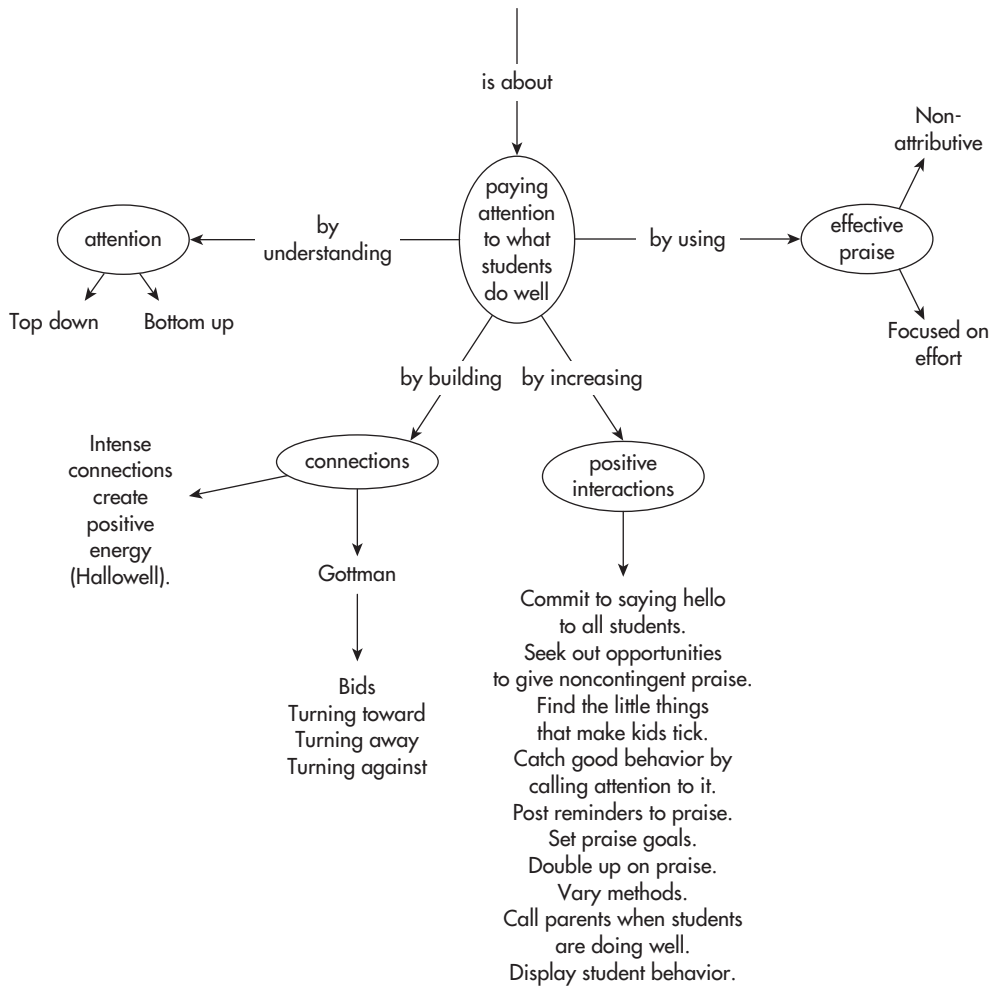


Chapter 14: Witness to the Good



14

WITNESS TO THE GOOD

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

—E. E. Cummings

The simple act of paying positive attention to people has a great deal to do with productivity.

—Tom Peters

Creating and teaching expectations is only the first part of the process of building a positive, productive learning community. Expectations that don't have an impact on students don't serve any useful purpose. We need to encourage and reinforce students to act within the boundaries laid out by what we have created and taught. One way to do this is by paying attention to students when they act consistently with expectations. If we let them know that we see them acting appropriately, we increase the amount of appropriate behavior. A teacher's attention is an extremely powerful reinforcer for student behavior. How and where a teacher directs her attention has a great impact on what happens in her classroom.

A simple metaphor might help illustrate how important a teacher's attention can be. My colleague and friend Devona Dunekack has a

Christmas cactus that sits prominently in a window in her living room. The plant thrives in the sunlight coming in through the window. Over time, all the plant's leaves turn toward the sun to soak up the life-giving energy, and Devona has to rotate it since every leaf is pointed toward the window and almost none of the plant's beauty is visible inside.

In the classroom, a teacher's attention affects children the way the sunshine affects Devona's cactus. Children adjust their behavior to get the warm sunshine of their teacher's attention. Thus, if a teacher only attends to students who misbehave, correcting students when they don't act consistently with expectations but failing to comment when they act consistently with expectations, the teacher may unintentionally encourage misbehavior. Students who want to be noticed by their teacher may misbehave just to get their teacher's attention (Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008). If a teacher mindfully watches to see when students are actively engaged in meaningful work or when they treat each other respectfully, and comments on what she sees, more and more students will engage in meaningful work and treat each other respectfully.

I refer to the act of watching for the positive things students do as "being a witness to the good." We are being a witness to the good when we are attentive and intentional about noticing everything our students do—not just the misbehavior. We are being a witness to the good when we are especially attentive to the times when students are making the best of learning opportunities. We are being a witness to the good whenever we recognize and encourage students for acting in ways that are consistent with expectations.

But being a witness to the good is not always easy. For most of us, noticing the students who are *not* following the expectations is much easier than noticing the students who are following them. If we have a better understanding of how our attention works, we get a better understanding of why being a witness to the good can be difficult.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Attention

Winifred Gallagher, in *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2009), helped me understand why it is difficult—almost unnatural—to be a witness to the good. Gallagher describes two types of attention that we may bring to any experience such as those we see in the classroom. *Bottom-up attention* is the attention we use when we notice something we can't help noticing. For example, if I catch the scent of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, that scent will get my attention.

I can't help but notice that sweet aroma. Bottom-up attention can notice pleasant things like cookies, or unpleasant events like a crying baby. What defines bottom-up attention is that it is something we can't avoid noticing.

Top-down attention, on the other hand, occurs only when we prompt ourselves to look for something. For example, we might be driving down the road watching for a sign that marks where we need to turn off the highway. If we are not vigilant, we might miss our turn and get lost. With top-down attention, we must be intentional to notice what we notice. If we don't tell ourselves to see whatever we are looking for, we miss it.

In the classroom, students who are off task or misbehaving catch our bottom-up attention. If you are looking at 32 students and one is out of line, which student will you notice? We can't help but notice the student who blows off the learning. To truly be witnesses to the good, we need to teach ourselves to see all that is going well and not just the aberrations; in other words, we need to use top-down attention.

To use the earlier metaphor of the cactus plant, if our attention is like sunshine, then we need to make sure that bottom-up attention to misbehavior doesn't dominate the way we interact with students. Indeed, we need to make sure we give a lot more attention to the good than the not-so-good. Some authors say the proportion of positive to negative attention should be nine-to-one times; others say three-to-one. Some studies outside of the classroom are telling. John Gottman, for example, reports that at least a five-to-one positive to negative ratio exists in healthy and successful marriages (1994). Gottman writes, "Unstable marriages are likely to be those that, over time . . . fall into a pattern that does not maintain the balance of positivity to negativity at a high level" (p. 380). Similarly, Marcial Losada and Barbara Fredrickson (Losada, 1999; Fredrickson & Losada, 2004) studied 60 different companies and observed their work teams, coding their meeting conversations, and they found that the most productive teams had a 2.9-to-one positive to negative ratio. Whatever numbers we like, a majority of our attention needs to reinforce positive and productive behavior.

Positive Attention and Learning

There are many reasons why it is important to be a witness to the good. One of the most important is reinforcing behavior. Another important reason is that being a witness to the good encourages connection. A major learning inhibitor is lack of connection. When students feel connected to their learning, to their peers, and to their

teacher, they are much more likely to get the most out of their learning opportunities. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of several books on leadership, focus, and productivity, identifies connection as one of the most important variables distinguishing excellent performers. Although Hallowell is describing employees in the workplace, his comments about the importance of connection in *Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best From Your People* (2011) could easily apply to students:

Connection refers to the bond an individual feels with another person, group, task, place, idea, mission, piece of art, pet, or anything else that stirs feelings of attachment, loyalty, excitement, inspiration, comfort, or a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of connection. The more intense the connection, the more effective the employee will be. Intense connection creates positive energy, and the more positive energy a person brings to work, the better work he will do.

By contrast, *disconnection* refers to disengagement and distance from a person, group, task, idea, or mission. . . . Disconnection is one of the chief causes of substandard work in the modern workplace. But it is also one of the most easily corrected. (p. 75)

One of the leading scholars studying the science of human connection is John Gottman at the University of Washington, mentioned above. Gottman (2001) conducted research by creating an on-campus apartment where couples would stay for a weekend at a time so that researchers could study how they interacted. To record a couple's interactions, researchers placed cameras in the living and dining rooms of the apartment and video recorded all interactions between 9:00 a.m and 9:00 p.m. Then they reviewed the video, breaking down the recordings, in some cases, into segments that are less than a second long. Based on their analysis, Gottman and his colleagues determined that emotional connection is the critical variable in healthy relationships and that there are specific acts, both conscious and unconscious, that foster or inhibit healthy connections. Gottman summarizes his findings as follows:

A very fundamental and simple idea has emerged from our research: We have discovered the elementary constituents of closeness between people, and we have learned the basic principle that regulates how relationships work and also determines a great deal about how conflict between people can be

regulated. That basic idea has to do with the way people, in mundane moments in everyday life, make attempts at emotional communication, and how others around them respond, or fail to respond, to these attempts. (p. xi)

According to Gottman, the crucial move in relationships is what he calls a bid, a message we send, verbally or nonverbally, that says to somebody that we want to be connected to them:

Even our best efforts to connect can be jeopardized as a result of one basic problem: failure to master what I call the “bid”—the fundamental unit of emotional communication. . . . A bid can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says, “I want to feel connected to you.” A response to a bid is just that—a positive or negative answer to somebody’s request for emotional connection. (p. 4)

What Gottman found after studying thousands of hours of video recordings of couples interacting is that emotional connection is fostered or squelched by the way in which we make and respond to bids for connection. When someone makes a bid to us, we can increase emotional connection by responding positively toward it, what Gottman refers to as “turning toward the bid.” When people turn toward bids, Gottman writes, those positive responses “typically lead to continued interaction, often with both parties extending more bids to one another. Listening to this kind of exchange is kind of like watching a Ping-Pong game in which both players are doing very well” (p. 7).

In unhealthy relationships, people miss the chance to turn toward the bid, and either turn against the bid by responding in a belligerent or argumentative way or turn away from the bid by ignoring the bid or not responding at all. Gottman found that when parents turn away from or turn against their children, for example, it can have long-term, negative consequences:

Our studies indicate that children whose parents consistently thwart their bids for connection often suffer long-term consequences as a result of constantly experiencing more negative emotions and fewer positive emotions. They have trouble developing the social skills to get along with friends, for example. They don’t do as well academically, and they have more problems with physical health. (p. 18)

Gottman's research provides another reason why teachers should be a witness to the good. When teachers catch their students doing something right, they foster emotional connection between themselves and their students. And, as we've seen, connection is critical for student success. Not every student will feel a connection with the teacher, and not every student needs to. But we do a disservice to students if we don't foster relationships in which students feel that some kind of connection is possible.

Lori Sinclair talks about being a witness to the good.



Video 14.1
[www.corwin.com/
highimpactinstruction](http://www.corwin.com/highimpactinstruction)

How to Be a Witness to the Good

At its most fundamental level, being a witness to the good is simply about taking the time to see and comment on the actions our students do that foster personal or group learning. Over the years, many of my colleagues (including Randy Sprick, Wendy Reinke, the coaches working with the Kansas Coaching Project, and the coaches from Beaverton, Oregon) have given me excellent suggestions on how to increase positive attention, many of which are included in *Coaching Classroom Management*.

One strategy for increasing attention to the positive is to make a list of behaviors teachers especially want to watch for each day. Such behaviors might be simple actions, such as getting ready for class at the bell, staying focused on a learning activity, listening when other students are talking, or using the correct talking level during an activity.

Being a witness to the good, however, does not mean we have to focus only on particular student behaviors. This strategy is primarily about building connections with students. Hallowell (2011), mentioned above, suggests that we “start simply by intending to connect”:

Make it a priority. Instead of relying on metaphorically beating people up, build relationships. Become curious and interested in others. . . . Using the tool you know best—yourself—to connect with others and help others connect, you can bring out the best in the people you lead. (p. 98)

In a short clip on England's Teacher TV, the UK website, no longer available, that was packed with videos of great teaching, a teacher describes what she does to build connections with her students. Each Friday she sits down and lists the names of all of her students. Then she looks over the list to see whom she has forgotten and who is at the bottom of her list and thinks about the particular strengths of the students she missed or thought of last. The following Monday and

the rest of the week, she seeks out these students and calls attention to their strengths. Then at the end of the week, she repeats the process, always focusing on students' strengths, and always focusing on building connections. There are many other strategies teachers can employ; some of them are included in the list in Figure 14.1 (many of these ideas were first described in Sprick, Knight, Reienke, McKale, & Barnes, 2010).

Keeping Track of Positive Interactions With Students

In the classroom management and positive behavior literature, when we attend to how often we interact positively with students, we often refer to ratios of interaction (Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008). As mentioned above, there is no set rule for the number of positive versus negative interactions, but the lowest number I've seen is

Figure 14.1 Increasing Positive Interactions

- Commit to saying hello to every student as he or she enters the classroom (put special emphasis on kids with whom you may have had a recent negative interaction).
- Seek out positive (appropriate) interactions that are not contingent on behavior.
- Find the little things that make kids tick (activity, team, interest, etc.) and talk about them with them.
- Catch the good behavior by drawing attention to it (thanking students, commenting, etc.).
- Focus praise or attention on effort rather than attributes (talk about a student's hard work rather than a student's intelligence).
- Pay attention to academic and behavioral opportunities for praise.
- Post reminders to praise (sticky note to yourself on the Elmo; poster in the class, on your lesson plans).
- Set specific praise goals (today every student who gets the book out will be praised).
- Set goals based on irrelevant prompts (every time a teacher enters my room, I'll praise three kids).
- Double up on praise by naming all students who are doing something appropriate (Michelle, Lea, Susan, and Jenny, thanks for getting your book out so quickly).
- Vary methods of praise.
- Call (or email) the parents of children who are doing well.
- Send home postcards to parents to praise kids.
- Prominently display student work in the classroom.
- Ignore minor misbehavior if the behavior is attention seeking.



Download this form
at [www.corwin.com/
highimpactinstruction](http://www.corwin.com/highimpactinstruction)

giving at least three times as much positive attention to students as negative attention. In our many informal studies of teachers in action, I rarely see teachers who have a positive ratio; indeed, often the ratio is one-to-six or even more weighted toward the negative.

Positive attention is not the same as a talking positively. I find it helpful to keep in mind the idea of attention being like sunlight. Positive attention is based on what students are doing when we attend to them, not the tone of our voice. Telling a student, “Alexa, I know you’re such a great student that you’ll get back to work right now” sounds positive, but it still brings attention to the negative. In that moment, we are giving Alexa our attention because she is off task, and that is how we need to record it. This is not to say we shouldn’t correct students—we absolutely must—and in the next section, I’ll describe effective corrections. However, if we want to encourage behaviors with our attention, we need to ensure that our attention to the positive happens much more often than our attention to the negative.

We can learn a lot about how we spend our attention by video or audio recording a class and counting how many times we attend to the positive versus how many times we correct students. We can also keep track of how often we give group or individual attention to students. Or we can see how we interact with students depending on their gender, race, or other distinguishing characteristics.

If you decide to video record a class, start by setting up a micro-camera behind you as you teach. Once the class begins, push record, and although the video won’t capture your face, it will show you how your students respond to you.

After the class, when you watch the video, if you have a seating chart, you can put a plus underneath each student’s name when you are a witness to the good and a minus sign when you correct a student. If you give the entire class positive or negative attention, you can write a plus or minus on the side of the chart.

Of course, you could simply keep track of pluses and minuses or you could record how often you praise boys or girls, or review whatever other data you think it might be fruitful to notice.

In one school district the coaches I was working with visited more than one hundred classes. We found that, on average, the ratio of interaction was that for each positive statement there were six negatives. What would be the impact on learning and classroom culture if that ratio was reversed? What if you have a one-to-six ratio in your class?

Most teachers who gather data on their classes are surprised, sometimes shocked, by what they see. The video, however, doesn’t lie. By getting a clear picture of what is really happening in the classroom,

teachers can begin some truly powerful professional learning—and that could have a powerful impact on student learning.

Can Being a Witness to the Good Be Bad?

Positive attention fails whenever it is not perceived as being positive. At the most fundamental level, positive attention will fail if it is inauthentic. Children are just as adept as adults at spotting fake comments, and they react just as adults do. Hallowell puts it this way:

You have to be genuine in your efforts to connect. . . . A manager who reads [about positive interactions] and says, “I get it, I should wear a smiley button at work,” will get the opposite result of what he works for. Fake smiles and forced connections backfire. But if you try to put your most positive self forward, if you notice and appreciate others in simple and honest ways . . . you will go a long way toward creating the all-important positively connected atmosphere. (p. 86)

Harvard researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2001) offer a second suggestion on how to share positive information, which they refer to as “a language of ongoing regard.” A “language of ongoing regard” has specific characteristics. Kegan and Lahey stress that authentic, appreciative, or admiring feedback must be (a) direct, (b) specific, and (c) non-attributive. By “non-attributive,” Kegan and Lahey explain that our positive comments about others are more effective when we describe our experience of others rather than the attributes of others. They describe the problem with non-attributive praise as follows:

It may seem odd to you that we’re urging you not to make statements of this sort: “Carlos, I just want you to know how much I appreciate how generous you are” (or “what a good sense of humor you have” or “that you always know the right thing to say”), or “Alice, you are so patient” (or “so prompt,” “so never-say-die,” “always there when you are needed”), and so on. . . . These seem like such nice things to say to someone. What could possibly be the problem with saying them?

The problem we see is this: the person, inevitably and quite properly, relates what you say to how she knows herself to be. You can tell Carlos he is generous, but he knows how generous he actually is. You can tell Alice she is very patient, but she knows her side of how patient she is being with you. (p. 99)