

The Deep Secrets of Motivation: Sure-Fire Techniques for Getting People to Do Whatever You Want, When You Want It

Not hammer-strokes, but dance of the water sings pebbles into perfection.

—Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941),
Indian philosopher

If the title of this essay clove your eyes to the page; if the subtitle caused a grumbling in your guts, a pang of prurience; if you suddenly sucked in a half-breath at its overwhelming promise of power, then you are probably too immature to continue reading on. Please skip to the next article.

There may be deep secrets of motivation; I very much doubt it. I have attended many seminars on motivation, and read many, many books and articles on it, only to be confronted with the same ancient, basic truths, banalities that—if too clearly articulated—generally go uncelebrated because they are so obvious. You know them as well as I if you have survived past your twenty-first year. (To be charitable I chose twenty-first rather than tenth.) You may have once learned them—and deep down inside you still know them—but, like many people, you may have forgotten these motivational truths: for the sake of your ego; for the sake of what you think people might say; for the sake of social convention; or for the sake of dreams beyond the likelihood of achievement.

Or, if you are new in education, you ignore your knowledge of human motivation for the sake of some half-baked educational fad that has been foisted off on you in the name of Raising Expectations, Enhancing Self-Esteem, Increasing Standardized Test Scores, Inculcating Values, Promoting Anti-X or Anti-Y Education—whatever X and Y your local political aspirants deem fit to burden the local schools with.

I occasionally teach a graduate course called “Classroom Management and School Discipline.” My students are a mix of change-of-profession teacher aspirants and practicing classroom teachers pursuing master’s degrees. They have two to five years’ experience. Some come to the course worried and confused, often looking for the magic wand that will turn them into superteachers. Others really don’t need the course. They turn out to be quite on top of things. I suspect that they are probably seeking legitimation for the methods they have adopted that give them success.

What do I teach them? Very little. Rather I try to help them find within themselves what they need to deal successfully with the students in their classes. For the sake of brevity, and my own pedagogical compulsions, I will list the basic “truths” my students and I have found to be critical to enhancing their classroom management skills.

The first secret: Understand why *you* want “better discipline” in your classroom. Don’t kid yourself and don’t try to convince the students before you are very sure yourself. For example, don’t piously preach, “I want you to learn to the maximum of your potential!” Nonsense. You don’t know what any kid’s potential is, much less his or her maximum potential. Don’t say, either, “I want you to learn so you can go on to college and a good job!” Are you a deity? Can you predict the future? What makes you think you are so important that doing well in your class is the absolute prerequisite

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to a decent future? Rather, admit that you want to be able to teach your students in a reasonably enjoyable environment, to share your knowledge with them and know that they to some extent appreciate both your efforts and the material learned. You would like them to like being in your class and feel it is worthwhile. Disruptive and off-task behavior prevents that from happening. That's why you want more classroom control.

I have not considered the possibility you may just be a control freak indulging a pathological need to exercise power. I expect your supervisor would have spotted that and terminated your career early.

The second secret: Discipline begins with yourself. If you're looking for love, get a lover—leave those kids out of it. If you're feeling angry or frustrated with your life, blame your lover or leave your lover, but leave those kids out of it.

One of my students complained to me that her fifth-grade pupils used foul language in the classroom, copiously and incessantly. This so upset her that she would scream at them to stop and threaten them with punishments. But the students would only laugh and continue. How, she implored me, could she get them to stop?

Rather than immediately extending some practical advice, I asked her if she wanted a technique that was quick and effective, or one less successful at first but more effective over the long run. Quick and effective, of course, came her reply. I responded: tell the students you want them to avoid bad language or you will kill them. The next time a student utters an offensive word, kill that student—shooting is as humane a way as any. Until the police come to take you away, you will probably not hear another bad word from the kids.

This little Zen exercise is one way I introduce my students to the *third secret* of motivation: not every effective means of controlling behavior can or ought to be employed. If effective behavioral control were really so important as some would have us believe, every school would have a torture chamber and a brothel. Then you could watch those standardized test scores really rise!

The practical advice I gave that teacher about foul language was based on the second secret—"discipline begins with yourself." Displaying dismay or discomfort, I explained, may have prompted more of the language she objected to. The students were controlling her rather than vice versa. They said a nasty word, and she then screamed or provided other entertainment.

I suggested that she sit in front of a mirror—preferably alone—and repeat aloud every obscene and nasty word she had ever heard until none of them was anything more than a sound. (If you have religious concerns, keep in mind that there is no general religious prohibition, no commandment, against using obscenities or scatological references.) It may take several sessions for you to reach this point, but that is what these words are: nothing more than sound.

Once you are back in the classroom, ignore the words, or at best, offer the mild reproof that they are not appropriate for the classroom. (NAFTC, some teachers say).

The fourth secret: Your students are prisoners. You are there by choice. They face sanctions if they exercise choice by cutting, playing hooky, etc. You have a moral obligation to be somewhat entertaining, at least until you have secured their faith that you will not waste their time.

Thus, you have two main burdens as a teacher: first, you must learn to present your subject matter as engagingly as possible, through games, puzzles, or the like. Second, in faculty meetings and through your teacher organizations you must struggle to save your students from additional burdens. The brainstorming and agendas of those outside the classroom often translate into tedium and arid, wasted childhoods for the kids inside. How many seemingly eternal seconds have you lived through because someone, somewhere, decided that something would be good for you?

The fifth secret: Your students are rational beings. That does not say much, but it is something very important. Some people like to dismiss the concerns and wants of others on the grounds that they are "irrational." Such a label is either a power play, or an effort to create confusion. A person (or an animal, for that matter) who can recognize and adjust his or her behavior in pursuit of goals is rational. It is not to say that the goals are socially desirable or the same as anyone else's. It means that students will want to do other than what you, with your goals in mind, would wish them to. It means that they—like most adults—tend to pursue short-term goals to the detriment of long-term ones. Most important, it means that they are capable of judging your behavior in terms of the goals you announce and evaluating you on that basis. If you preach against rudeness but interrupt or ignore students for no apparent reason, expect them to hold that against you. If you prattle at them about preparedness but come

to class unprepared . . . well, they will know what you are. If you engage them in concerns about justice and fairness—always a topic of interest among older children—but blindly follow the dictates of benighted superiors, then *you* know what you are. Being a teacher often means taking your battles to the wider community so you can provide the resources of time and materials that make the classroom experiences of children more than just tolerable. School, for kids, is Life.

The sixth secret: The system may very well not help you, or the kids—especially in systems that too frequently and loudly preach something like “Kids first!” This is not to say that people in education don’t care about the kids: any educator who could be making an easier buck in some other line of work probably has some thought of helping kids. But having a value does not mean that it is always or ever given priority—particularly if it requires interaction with the political environments that constitute our educational systems.

Official modes of treatment may well backfire in practice. Consider the reserved thirteen-year-old Cambodian girl in one of my middle school classes. One day, after a Cambodian boy said something to her, she stood up and began a tirade—in Cambodian—that lasted nearly five minutes. Then she collapsed into her chair, sobbing.

Another Cambodian student told me that the girl was “not well,” so I sent her to the school nurse. A physical examination revealed that the girl was covered with welts from below the neck to her knees, probably from being whipped with an extension cord or something similar. Before calling in a social worker, my team-teaching partner and I consulted the Cambodian community representative—a very powerful man in the Cambodian community because he was an undertaker. The spirits of improperly buried Cambodians must walk the earth and vampirize their relatives.

After the undertaker visited the family, the girl returned to school participative, lively, outgoing. We met our Cambodian colleague later and asked him what he had done. His answer: he had informed the father that his upcoming funeral would not include a proper burial unless he let the girl alone.

Can you imagine a child welfare worker developing that plan of motivation?

The seventh secret: Today’s burden, too, shall pass. The kids of 2001 are not like what your professors knew ten years ago; nor, in ten more years,



will kids be like what you find now. Your career, not this class or this behavior problem, is the measure of your character.

How will you look back on things after years of teaching? Or will you drop out before then, joining the ranks of the ten percent who leave the profession every year because it didn’t turn out to be what they had expected?

As I think back on my days as a public school student, I can remember little, if anything, of specific facts or materials I learned from any particular teacher. What I do remember is who taught respect by respecting us as persons, who taught self-reliance by letting us be self-reliant, who taught justice by being just. And I do remember those miserable beings who—to us—pursued power just for unseen ends, by trying to intimidate, to cram, to crush us into their own mold. “For your own good,” they would always say.

I can well remember. And so will your students.

Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them...

—Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)