

Emails: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Introduction

Disclaimer about qualifications for presentation.

According to some of the emails I have received, I have the dubious 'honor' of successfully destroying more 4.00 G.P.A's than any other instructor in the state of Texas. Feel comfortable in bounding toward the door at this time!

A word about my training and background. My degrees and training are in counseling and psychotherapy not in pedagogy and this creates a somewhat different bent to my educational philosophy. For example, in studying moral development, a theorist by the name of Kohlberg originally studied male development of moral decision making and concluded that the primary basis was upon 'justice' or 'law and order' concept. A counterpart to his ideas was an early feminist named Carol Gilligan who objected to his all male study and concluded from her research with women that the basis for their moral decision making was 'mercy' or the desire to connect with others. So we have two poles of thinking: justice vs. mercy! My academic side leans in the direction of justice and my counseling side prefers mercy. The tension between these two concepts is an ongoing dilemma in the classroom. We all face this tension between these poles...i.e. friendly vs. friend, mentor vs. enabler, helpful or harmful.

Thus, I bounce back and forth in an effort to identify who, what, when, where, and how to apply one of these concepts to the classroom experience.

Today, I am slightly more oriented toward the 'mercy' concept and hopefully do not simultaneously compromise the need for justice.

Framework for developing this presentation.

Textbook by Carkhuff and Berenson from my graduate days.

Five levels of responding to patient's issues.

Level 1: Negative. Does more harm than good.

Level 2: Neutral. Fails to acknowledge core problem. Detracts significantly from issue.

- *Use "Peanuts" illustration. "I'm concerned about my future." "I'm so glad I am set in my plans." "We're having tacos for supper."
- If you think you have a problem, let me tell you about my problem.
- That's nothing, I had that experience and it was just a temporary annoyance.

Level 3: Recognizes and acknowledges issue. May 'parrot' or rephrase statement to indicate a level of understanding of concern. . May include recognition of cognitive and emotional content.

Level 4: Initiates the therapeutic process and begins the exploration of issue with client.

Level 5: Deepens the exploration and may introduce basic underlying issues that client is not aware of.

Today's focus will be on Levels 1, 2, and 3. Don't worry! This is not a training class on developing psychotherapists. The research that Carkhuff and Berenson used for the basis of their concept indicated that even a Level 3 response had therapeutic and healing capabilities. So we are going to look at these levels and see how they can apply to emails!

Before we get to actual emails, let's talk about birds! Another disclaimer...I am not a biologist by training but do find birds exceptionally interesting. Three kinds of birds from my perspective fall into the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly!

At **Level 1** we have the **Ugly! Buzzards!**

Characteristics of buzzards.

- Prefer dead meat.
- Survive on carrion.
- Wait until an object is dead and then devour it.
- Angry and hostile when confronted by other predators.
- Very defensive about their 'catch'.
- Take no prisoners.
- Very protective of their 'stuff'.

Characteristic comments of buzzards.

- Use of sarcastic retort.*
- Use of hostile humor.
- Sharp, biting wit with an underlying anger component.
- Hurtful. Denigrates.
- Put downs.

*Impersonal nature of electronic communication makes very difficult to use sarcasm, humor or wit in an effective way!

Some typical comments from buzzards.

- "So, sue me!" "No, don't ask again." "Wrong, wrong, wrong!"
- "Not happening!" "Forget it!" "Not today!" "You must be joking!" "Get serious!" "I'm in charge!!!" "I win. You lose." "Whatever!"

Buzzard's communication patterns are at **Level 1** and they likely encounter considerable difficulty with relationships whether electronic or otherwise.

Potential hazards.....

Now, for a second glance at the Buzzards among us! Buzzards perform a needful and important function.

- They clean up the mess!
- They do the things that no other bird will take on!
- They remove the rot from the environment and curtail the possible spread of disease.

So the dilemma arises...is there ever a time to be a buzzard? Yes. However, it should be used sparingly, judiciously, and with great caution. It should be the last resort of action! It may require sanctions from an administrative level.

Example: Long neck bottle incident!

At **Level 2** we have the '**Bad**'. **Crows!**

Characteristics of Crows.

- Make lots of noise. Highly visible. Groupies.
- Flap about a lot.
- Can be very destructive. Can destroy crops. Need for Scarecrow.
- Can be a big nuisance.
- Not particularly beneficial.
- Oblivious to efforts to move.
- Don't make good pets such as parakeets do.
- Competitive and not cooperative.

Characteristic comments of Crows.

- Impersonal. Blatant statement of policy.
- Vague, abstract, inappropriately intellectual
- Strictly factual. No explanation.
- No problem solving offered. No possible options. No exceptions.
- Completely ignores concern or problem.
- Somewhat intimidating. Mildly threatening.
- Issues are strictly black and white. Right way is my way.
- Justice oriented.

Some typical comments from Crows.

- "As stated in the syllabus..." "The facts are..." "You do not have an option." "Ninety five percent of the students..." "I don't see how this is a problem." "All students..." "This is the way that it is going to be." "I have never had this problem with a student." "If you would follow the instructions I gave you..."

Crow's communication patterns are at **Level 2** and they may find that the issue escalates up the chain of command and takes considerable time, effort, and energy from all the professionals involved.

Potential hazards of Crows.....

Remember, we can be 100% right but not effective.

Another glance at Crows. We need Crows within the flock! They are the gatekeepers. They keep "Law and Order". They consistently implement the rules that keep things from running into the ditch! They remain firm and steadfast without compromising the basic values that undergird rules. Particularly effective when moral, legal, and ethical issues are involved.

Example: Plagiarism email.

At **Level 3** we have the **Good! Swans.**

Characteristics of Swans.

- Peaceful. Calm. Create a sense of serenity. Sense of well being.
- Beautiful.
- Need placid water. Glide. Smooth sailing.
- Avoid turbulent water. Get on bank when needed.
- Stay afloat although small legs and unusually large body mass.
- Paddle to stay afloat. Don't create large waves and don't appear to thrash about in order to float.

Characteristic reactions of Swans.

- Address the issue. Concrete, specific. Show how to correct error.
- Uses referral sources when indicated (i.e. writing center, etc.).
- Carefully think through response. Respectful.
- Empathic vs. sympathetic.
- Convey understanding. May acknowledge issue beyond presenting problem.
- Can recognize both cognitive and emotional content. Uses this insight to defuse situation (i.e. terms such as frustrating, confusing, difficult, challenging, overwhelming,).
- Encourages when appropriate. Comments on quality of work. Auntie Mame says "Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!" "Catch them being good!" (i.e. grade improvement, etc.)
- Personalizes responses. Use student's name in response.
- Win/Win attitude.
- Do no harm mentality.

Typical Comments of Swans.

- Sorry, but I am confused as to the question.
- Help me to understand where this went wrong.
- Let's look at this and see what can be done.
- This needs clarification. I see where it was difficult.
- I need some time to look...investigate...explore...check...think... about this. I will get back to you then.
- I'm not sure about the question. Could you help me with this?
- Could it be that...?
- That's interesting. I had not seen it from that perspective. I need to think about this.
- I had never thought of it that way. I want to take a second look at the question.
- Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I need to clarify this.
- I appreciate it when a student expresses concern about a grade. Let's look into the situation and see what needs to be done.
- This is frustrating. I'm not sure about this. Do you mean... Please be more specific so that I can better respond to your concern.
- What is your thinking on this?
- Help me out by being more specific on this.

Potential hazards of Swans.....

Functions of Swans. Level 3.

- Keep the peace. Less time spent addressing problems.
- Integral component of a retention program.
- Generates student respect for educational process.
- Helps quell the spread of rebellion amongst classmates.

Example of swan response*.....

Make a sandwich response. i.e. ++ - + ++- -+

Caveat about a template. Response should be sincere and not phony. Students can readily identify fake responses. Good teachers are thoroughly immersed in topic and love it. Excellent teachers love both topic and their students!!!!

Challenges of Internet Communication in academia.

Example: That's just great!

Characteristics of Internet Communication.

- Lacks body language and vocal cues as to nature of communication
- Anonymity. Limited to no face to face contact.
- Potential for rudeness and discourteous comments. Toxic. Destructive.

- Instant 'familiarity'.
- Focus on banal, inane, irrelevant information.
- Indiscrete. Rarely self-censored.
- Limited accountability.
- Use of jargon, etc. Poor reading and writing skills.
- Opportunity to 'sound off'. Promotes electronic road rage. Flaming!
- TMI. Too much information is available.
- Instant. Cannot retrieve once it is sent.
- Easily misunderstood.
- Forever. Can't unring a bell!
- Brevity can limit thoughtful analysis and evaluation of message.

Some Characteristics of Contemporary Students.

- Boundaries are almost nonexistent.
- Unrealistic about abilities.
- May be under prepared for rigorous demands of college work.
- May be technically challenged.
- Overextended, overworked, overwhelmed.
- Experience time management issues.
- Experience serious personal issues. Divorce, etc.
- Relatively short attention span.
- May be desperate and see us as a barrier to their goals.
- Lack 'fetching up'. Good manners are often MIA.
- Difficulty in prioritizing due to wide variety of responsibilities.
- Lack good study skills.

Become Proactive instead of Reactive.

- Avoid becoming defensive. Story of Jean Crane.
- Syllabus is a critical component of addressing potential problems.
- Anticipate big events (i.e. exams, new deadlines, projects due...).
- Anticipate power outages and have an alternate plan in place.
- Educate students about potential computer issues.
- Have students identify their personal contingency plan in the event of a power outage or a computer crash.
- Develop a system that allows some leeway for drops, deaths, etc. Tailor this to the nature of subject matter and your personal ideas about how to accommodate the myriad exceptions to your concept of how things should be done. Have some flexibility built into the course.
- Anticipate the end of the semester crush about grades before the end of the semester.
- Provide students accurate and timely feedback about grades.
- Inform students to regularly check their emails for updates, etc. Use pager. Hold students responsible for information in emails at time it was sent.

- Be very careful about humor.
- Treat your emails as being 'public' communication.
- If responding to a question, repeat the question in your response.
- Double check potential recipients before sending. Do you want to send to all or not?
- Place longer emails in draft and carefully edit before sending. Use spell check and edit for grammatical errors.
- If an email doesn't pass the 'smell test' confer with your supervisor. If indicated, send blind copy to the supervisor.
- Vet material prior to beginning of class and before big assignments.
- 'Cool off' before responding to a hostile email.
- Avoid giving straight advice. It can backfire quickly and you get the blame for the decision.
- Use the feedback function in D2L for instruction, correction, encouragement, etc.
- Educate students on Netiquette.
- Prepare a 'Tips for Improving Grades' handout/email. Also, think of the most frequent emails you receive and have an arsenal in place to respond quickly. Do not forget to personalize this information when you send.

Topics: Emails. The Good. The Bad. The Ugly.

Below is a list of potentially challenging email topics. Develop a Buzzard (Level 1), Crow (Level 2) or Swan (Level 3) response for each of these topics.

1. Offensive comments (i.e. sexual, racial, etc.)
 2. Rude, crude material is introduced into discussion.
 3. Computer shutdown during exam.
 4. Death (parents, grandparents, close relative, distant relative, friend).
1. Suicide (parents, grandparents, close relative, distant relative, friend).
 2. Illness (self, child, spouse, friend).
 3. Complaint about difficulty of exams.
 4. Disagree with class format.
1. Plagiarism or other academic dishonesty issues.
 2. Poor preparation or background for class.
 3. Poor use of grammar, spelling, etc.
 4. Deployment of spouse. Return of spouse from deployment.
1. No shows.

2. Dropped from class.
3. Attending wedding.
4. Going on cruise.

1. Newborn. Miscarriage.
2. Did not complete assignment because did not understand it.
3. Desperate need for a specific grade in order to graduate, get into certain programs, keep financial aid, etc.
4. Getting married.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

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Instructions for activity.

- Divide into groups of four.
- Look at Handout and view the numbered scenarios.
- **Groups One.** Select any scenario numbered one.
- **Groups Two.** Select any scenario numbered two.
- **Groups Three.** Select any scenario numbered three.
- **Groups Four.** Select any scenario numbered four.
- Within each group, one member is to take the basic scenario and compose a 'verbal' email about the situation.
- One member of the group volunteers to develop a "Buzzard" response.
- A second member of the group volunteers to develop a "Crow" response.

- A third member of the group volunteers to develop a “Swan” response.
- Use the small index cards to develop your response.
- Share your experience with the class.