

1 Seven Habits of Highly Effective Principals

How to Deal With Difficult Teachers

Before you get started . . .

Compare your own experience to that of this principal:

Angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused teachers do more to impact morale and school climate than anything. After a while, other teachers become tired of hearing the complaining and begin to distance themselves from them. Consequently, the staff loses some of its desire to collaborate and work as a team. This creates fragmentation which, in turn, impacts school improvement initiatives.

—C. J. Huff

Several years ago, I purchased a term life insurance policy. Although no physical exam was required, I did have to answer a series of questions over the telephone. The first question on the list was “What day is it?” I answered the question correctly, but asked the interviewer why it was necessary. “To see if you’re in touch with reality,” she replied. Management consultant Carl

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Frost of the Scanlon Leadership Network (2003) is well known for asking the same question of his corporate clients to remind them to stay alert regarding what's happening in their organizations. "Wake up and face reality," is his message. Difficult teachers are the reality that many administrators are currently ignoring in their schools.

Troublesome teachers are the proverbial "elephant" in faculty meetings. *Everyone* knows the elephant is there, but few are willing to confront the beast for fear of getting trampled. Many low-performing schools (and even some seemingly successful ones) are overrun with elephants. When the herd comes thundering down the hallway, everyone disappears, including, in some cases, the principal. It's time to wake up and face these enormous beasts. If you don't, your school may fail and take you along with it.

Before you can deal productively with difficult teachers, you must first examine your own attitudes and behaviors—the things you habitually think, say, and do. Dealing with difficult teachers demands that you face your own character flaws before you tackle those of your teachers. In fact, some teachers have suggested that my next book should be titled *How to Deal With Principals Who Are Angry, Troubled, Exhausted, or Just Plain Confused*. (Note: For a comprehensive treatise on the topic of principal mistreatment of teachers, see Blase & Blase, 2003.)

We all make mistakes from time to time. I have certainly made my share of them—especially as a brand-new administrator. Thankfully, there were effective and caring teachers on my staff who pointed out what I needed to do differently. I listened to

Leadership is worth the risk because the goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement. By making the lives of people around you better, leadership provides meaning in life. It creates purpose.

—*Heifetz and Linsky*
(2002, pp. 2–3)

them, albeit with some frustration, and eventually became a strong instructional leader. In the beginning, I was impatient to bring about change. I had to learn to listen and wait—postures that did not come easily to me.

However, there were problems that couldn't wait. There were several dysfunctional teachers whose problems were long overdue for remediation. With the support of

the superintendent, the district's legal counsel, and eventually the school board and teacher's union, I was able to address those issues, not always at the speed I desired, but with solid documentation and respect for due process. While teachers *do* have rights, they do not include the license to sexually, physically, verbally, and educationally abuse students. Some of the teachers in my school, those whose skills were the shakiest, believed that I was out to eliminate the *entire* faculty. There was uncertainty and even fear, but the effective teachers eventually came out from behind closed doors to embrace both shared leadership and their new principal. They began to see that our goal to raise achievement would only be realized when we were united in our expectations and values.

SEVEN HABITS FOR DEALING POSITIVELY WITH DIFFICULT TEACHERS

Whether your goal is to take the lead in reforming a dysfunctional school community or to deal with one or two difficult teachers, put the following seven habits of attitude and action into daily practice:

1. Being an assertive administrator
2. Being a character builder
3. Being a communicator
4. Nurturing a positive school culture
5. Being a contributor
6. Conducting assertive interventions
7. Doing it today

Each of these habits is essential to dealing with difficult teachers and, if practiced daily, will strengthen and enhance your instructional leadership.

Habit 1: Being an Assertive Administrator

Assertiveness is a mindset that impacts the way you communicate (words and body language) and behave (deeds) in your

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everyday (habitual) interactions with teachers. It is a positive, forthright approach to leadership that stands in stark contrast to

The most effective way to deal with students is also the most effective way to deal with teachers. Let your expectations be known to all—early on—and in all of your dealings with difficult teachers be firm, fair, and consistent.

—*Principal Craig Spiers*

less effective leadership styles characterized by either aggressiveness or hesitancy.

Assertive administrators are (a) mature and self-defined, (b) unwilling to take personal responsibility for the difficulties of dysfunctional teachers, and (c) not readily distracted from the school's mission by teachers' inappropriate behaviors. They are able to set boundaries and differentiate themselves from

teachers. Here are the capacities of self-differentiated administrators that set them apart from their aggressive and weak colleagues:

- The capacity to view oneself separately from teachers, with a minimum amount of anxiety about their feelings and problems
- The ability to maintain a nonanxious presence, present and attuned to what is happening now without worrying about tomorrow, when working with and interacting with teachers who are angry, troubled, exhausted, or confused
- The maturity to chart one's own course by means of an internal set of personal values rather than continually trying to figure out what others are thinking or trying to see which way "the wind is blowing" before making a decision
- The wisdom to be clear and committed about one's personal values and goals
- The willingness to take responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming either others or uncontrollable cultural, gender, or environmental variables (adapted from Friedman, 1991, pp. 134-170).

In contrast to their assertive colleagues, aggressive principals revel in the power that comes from being in charge. They specialize

in humiliating and demoralizing teachers, often in cruel and irrational ways (Blase & Blase, 2003; Carey, 2004). Aggressive administrators are bullies who, even though they already have position and evaluation power, seek to further dominate their subordinates. They foster anger, emotional stress, depression, and confusion.

Hesitant principals, on the other hand, are fair game for angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused teachers. Under the “leadership” of a weak administrator, a critical mass of difficult teachers can easily take over a school, turning it into an unhealthy environment faster than you can say, “Change in working conditions.” Weak or tentative principals are secretly troubled by the way teachers take advantage of them, but they are usually powerless to stand up either for themselves or for effective staff members who struggle in vain to maintain a positive school culture. They are unable to differentiate themselves from difficult teachers and often assimilate their anxiety and anger.

To determine if you have what it takes to be an assertive administrator, complete the Assertive Administrator Self-Assessment, Form 1.1. Further information and scoring directions can be found in *The Culture Builder’s Toolkit* (Resource B). To become a self-differentiated, assertive administrator requires persistent attention to the remaining six habits. Friedman (1991) describes the journey to assertiveness or self-differentiation as “a lifelong process [the development of a habit] of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation” (p. 134).

Because I keep difficult teachers in perspective, their impact on me is minimal. Their behavior often says more about them than me. Over the years I have learned to differentiate between our separate roles.

—*Principal Laurence Fieber*

Habit 2: Being a Character Builder

Dealing with difficult teachers is a central responsibility of instructional leaders. To do it effectively, you must first commit to being a character builder: *a role model whose values, words, and*

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deeds are marked by trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, respect, generosity, and humility. Pritchett and Pound (1993) advise, “You will find no better way to coach employees on what the new culture must look like than by how you carry yourself” (p. 79).

Form 1.1 The Assertive Administrator Self-Assessment

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Always</i>
Indicator 1	1	2	3	4	5
I protect and honor my own rights as an individual and also protect the rights of others.					
Indicator 2	1	2	3	4	5
I recognize the importance of boundaries and am able to stay connected to others while at the same time maintaining a sense of self and individuality.					
Indicator 3	1	2	3	4	5
I have positive feelings regarding myself and am thus able to create positive feelings in staff.					
Indicator 4	1	2	3	4	5
I am willing to take risks but recognize that mistakes and failures are part of the learning process.					
Indicator 5	1	2	3	4	5
I am able to acknowledge and learn from my successes as well as my failures.					
Indicator 6	1	2	3	4	5
I am able to give and receive both compliments and constructive criticism to and from staff.					
Indicator 7	1	2	3	4	5
I make realistic promises and commitments to staff and am able to keep them.					

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Indicator 8	1	2	3	4	5
I genuinely respect the ideas and feelings of others.					
Indicator 9	1	2	3	4	5
I am willing to compromise and negotiate with staff and others in good faith.					
Indicator 10	1	2	3	4	5
I am capable of saying no to and sticking to a position, but I do not need to have my own way at all costs.					
Indicator 11	1	2	3	4	5
I can handle anger, hostility, put-downs, and lies from staff without undue distress, recognizing that I am defined from within.					
Indicator 12	1	2	3	4	5
I can handle anger, hostility, put-downs, and lies from staff without responding in kind.					
Indicator 13	1	2	3	4	5
I am aware of my personal emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety), can name them, and manage them in myself.					
Indicator 14	1	2	3	4	5
I am prepared for and can cope with the pain that is a normal part of leading a school.					

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For helpful guidelines regarding how character builders conduct themselves during stress-filled confrontations with tough teachers, consult Figure 1.1, the Ten Commandments for Dealing With Difficult Teachers. These imperatives are succinct reminders that dealing with angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused

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teachers requires these character traits: *trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, respect, generosity, and humility.*

Figure 1.1 Ten Commandments for Dealing With Difficult Teachers

- I. Thou shalt treat all teachers with dignity and respect, regardless of their personal or professional problems.
- II. Thou shalt not harass, threaten, intimidate, or humiliate teachers either in private or public.
- III. Thou shalt document all actions, discussions, and confrontations with teachers clearly and accurately.
- IV. Thou shalt give explicit, direct, and honest feedback to teachers in a quiet, calm, and confident way.
- V. Thou shalt not share information about teachers unless the conversations occur with the superintendent, the district's legal counsel, or the board of education in a closed session.
- VI. Thou shalt provide clear and definitive expectations in any directives or requests to teachers.
- VII. Thou shalt never subject teachers to the silent treatment or attempt to isolate them from the life of the school.
- VIII. Thou shalt make all decisions regarding teachers based on the best interests of the students, the mission of the school, and the welfare of the entire school community.
- IX. Thou shalt never become defensive with teachers.
- X. Thou shalt never become aggressive or hostile to teachers.

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Character builders do more than model the enumerated character traits. They also *proactively* build character through the communication of high expectations to their teachers. Cathie West, principal of Mountain Way Elementary School in Washington state, has led several schools during her twenty-six years in the principalship. Early in her tenure at a new school, she enlists the teachers in a consensus-building process to develop a code of ethics unique to that building. According to Cathie, the process as well as the code that is created serves several purposes:

Developing a code of ethics with a new faculty is a quick way to find out how teachers are really getting along. The process itself is very illuminating. Staff members feel safe in small groups to say what they really think, and during the exercise I listen to their conversations. It is especially helpful to hear staff members discuss why one code statement is important (e.g., “we need to say that everyone is valuable because classified staff have been treated unequally in the past”) or why another item needs strengthening (e.g., “we need to include ‘respecting teaching styles’ because the previous principal had ‘favorites’”). At Mountain Way School, for example, I learned that major curriculum decisions had been made from the top down, so teachers very much wanted a statement in the code about being consulted before changes were made in the school.

Cathie uses the information she acquires during the process to make changes that nurture a positive culture. Once the code is in place, she uses it to reinforce expectations at the beginning of each school year and to periodically remind teachers of their professional obligations to colleagues. The existence of a code of ethics, developed jointly with the staff, has been helpful in other instances as well. She explains:

When I had to nonrenew a probationary teacher for professional misconduct, the code of ethics became a valuable tool at a meeting with the union reps. One look at the code and it

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was clear that the teacher knew better than to engage in the behavior that she did.

The Culture Builder's Toolkit, found in Resource B, contains a process exercise to develop a code of ethics tailored to the culture of *your* school using Cathie's code as a model.

Habit 3: Being a Communicator

A communicator is a genuine and open human being with the capacity to listen, empathize, interact, and connect with teachers in productive, helping, and healing ways. If you have strong communication skills and are able to fulfill the demands set forth in this definition with confidence and success, proceed to Habit 4. If you need a refresher or want to enhance some specific aspect of communication, however, refer to The Communicator's A-Z Handbook in Resource A. It provides a comprehensive look at a wide range of verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

When it comes to working with difficult teachers, the key word in the definition is *productive*. While there are many instances in which you will counsel teachers, interacting in healing and helping ways with them, as a communicator you should *never* attempt treatment, therapy, or even casual counseling for emotionally or mentally troubled teachers. The counseling role can be misunderstood and easily abused by administrators. Here's a brief example from my own personal experience:

I once worked for a principal whose office was the headquarters for more than half a dozen angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused members of a very large staff. He gathered these dysfunctional folks unto himself like a mother hen, making their problems his own and encouraging them to share intimate details of their lives. This principal could be seen for hours before and after school in earnest conversations with these troubled teachers. On the other hand, if you weren't a difficult teacher, he didn't have time for you.

The wise principal is sensitive regarding the point at which a relationship with a teacher may be crossing the line from a mutual exchange of ideas and healthy discussion to an unhealthy

dependency of the difficult teacher on the principal *or vice versa*. The principal's helping skills should be used to communicate expectations, offer support, suggest options, and provide instructional resources, but never to "fix" dysfunctional teachers. [For further discussion and description of communicators, see McEwan, 2003, pp. 1–20].

Principals' Roundtable: The Secret to Success

Elaine: You have all been successful in reducing, if not eliminating, the problems posed by angry, troubled, exhausted, or confused teachers. What's the secret to your success?

Judy Marquardt: We have worked very hard to build a professional learning community, using a collaborative approach to establish our mission and vision and then setting school improvement goals. The result is a cohesive staff with strong connections to our school and to each other that has reduced the number of negative staff members. Another by-product of collaboration is that our culture doesn't support negative teachers, so truly negative teachers tend to leave the school.

Todd Lambert: I believe that our students, the attitudes of parents, and leadership at both the building and district levels all play a significant role in how few difficult teachers we have.

Jim Ratledge: I credit an improved selection process that includes a thorough preselection screening for the fact that we have so few teachers with problems. The number of problem teachers in all categories was significantly reduced when a new superintendent gave principals authority to hire staff. At that point I was able to make huge improvements in the quality of staff.

Laurence Fieber: Due to a meticulous hiring process, unwavering support from me, and very high expectations that require stamina and hard work from teachers, we have almost no difficult teachers. With sixty-five staff members, I spend a considerable amount of time hiring competent people.

Kathie Dobberteen: Our district generally attracts and hires very good teachers, and it provides outstanding support for them during their first several years. However, it also has an aggressive

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policy of not re-electing temporary or probationary teachers if they are unable to measure up to our standards despite this assistance. The district also lends a great deal of support to principals when it is necessary to let people go.

Lydia Zuidema: I'm in a private school, and our teachers have a deep sense of commitment to their calling. I strive to provide order, stability, and assistance for them. I value them and their contributions highly, and so do parents. This makes for a very satisfied and productive staff.

Carol Kottwitz: Parents definitely play a role in reducing the number of ineffective teachers in my school as well. My parent community does not stand for ineffective teachers and so the administration works to weed out inefficiency. Also, my staff does a pretty good job of collaborating, and they alienate poor teachers to the extent that they eventually leave the building.

Margaret Garcia-Dugan: I had so few ineffective teachers (when I was a principal) because I did not tolerate them. A principal needs to be in control of the environment of the school just like the teacher needs to be in control of the classroom environment. I always tackled problems head-on. But the most important thing I did was to hire quality teachers. I think that is the single most important task of a principal. To have a great school, you need the best teachers. I believe if you work really hard on teacher selection, you will have fewer problems in the end.

Elaine: How did you find the best teachers?

Margaret Garcia-Dugan: I had a lengthy interviewing process for teachers to undergo. I made extensive reference checks prior to employment, and teachers also had to demonstrate their instructional expertise by teaching a ten-minute lesson. I asked questions that revealed their philosophies of teaching as well as their personal beliefs.

Elaine: Together you have painted a very complete picture of the things that highly effective principals do to reduce, if not eliminate, difficult teachers: (a) build a strong and positive culture, (b) maintain high expectations, (c) find and hire the right people, and (d) be willing to let people go right away if they don't measure up.

Habit 4: Nurturing a Positive School Culture

Culture consists of the norms and expectations for how things are done and how people act in an organization. When you become a principal, either for the first time or in a brand-new school, immediately begin to assess the cultural norms in your school. In addition, pay attention to its climate, *how members of the school community feel about the current status of a specific cultural norm.* Use both formal assessments, such as those provided in The Culture Builder's Toolbox in Resource B, and informal observation regarding what goes on in the office, hallways, classrooms, and teachers' work room. Once you have completed your assessment, it's up to you to begin working to change the cultural norms that negatively impact the achievement of the mission. Here's an example:

One aspect of school culture concerns how decisions are made—whether dictatorially, in a shared fashion, or somewhere in between. Teachers may feel comfortable about leaving decisions up to their principal if things are going well, if the staff has worked together for a long time, and if the principal always makes decisions in the best interests of the teachers. On the other hand, if a new principal comes along and tries to make decisions *without* consulting the faculty, teachers may suddenly become distrustful—especially if the new principal's decisions change their workload. The climate will change overnight.

Recall what Cathie West discovered while developing a code of ethics in her current school. Her teachers didn't like the fact that they had no role in reviewing or giving feedback to committees after decisions were made, the cultural norm before she was hired. Cathie was able to add some steps to the decision-making process, thereby changing the norm. This change in how decisions were made ultimately improved the climate in the building as generated by how teachers felt.

A major aspect of *your* school's current culture concerns how you deal with teachers whose behaviors undermine the school's effectiveness and productivity. For example, if I were to poll your faculty on this issue, they would undoubtedly be able to describe exactly what you do. *They* know whether you typically yell at a difficult teacher and then, once your anger has passed, forget about the

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problem. Or they might describe your policy as “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Conversely, they might report that you deal directly and fairly with all staff members using a set of expectations and standards for professional behavior to which everyone is held accountable. However, if you are unwilling to confront incompetence or a lack of commitment to the school’s mission among even a few faculty members, you will pay the price in the following ways:

- Lowered teacher morale
- The devaluation of the school’s effective teachers
- Loss of trust and respect from parents and students—for you individually as well as your school
- Loss of teacher efficacy and empowerment
- A downward spiral of academic achievement and an upward spiral of behavioral problems

Turning around a negative or dysfunctional school culture requires that you pay scrupulous attention to your deeds (Habit 2)

There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared.

—*Nanus (1992, p. 3)*

and words (Habit 3). Everything you do and say should be rooted to the greatest extent possible in a *strong and viable vision based on achievement, character, personal responsibility, and accountability for all of the members of the school community.*

The challenge is that school culture is never static. Changes in personnel, circumstances, and district policies occur constantly, and even the smallest changes have the

potential to chip away at a school’s culture. To nurture a positive culture, you will want to regularly assess the health of your school. The sixteen indicators shown in Figure 1.2, The Healthy School Checklist, describe a healthy school. A scale of descriptors for each indicator as well as directions for scoring and interpreting the checklist can be found in Resource B. Once you have determined the “health” of your school, use the findings to develop suitable action plans.

Figure 1.2 The Healthy School Checklist

Indicator 1: All students are treated with respect by all staff members, to include principal, teachers, instructional aides, secretary and office staff, custodial staff, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers.

Indicator 2: The principal and staff establish high expectations for student achievement, which are directly communicated to students and parents.

Indicator 3: The principal and staff members serve as advocates for students and communicate with them regarding aspects of their school life.

Indicator 4: The principal encourages open communication among staff members and parents and maintains respect for differences of opinion.

Indicator 5: The principal demonstrates concern and openness in the consideration of teacher, parent, or student problems and participates in the resolution of such problems when appropriate.

Indicator 6: The principal models appropriate human relations skills.

Indicator 7: The principal develops and maintains high morale.

Indicator 8: The principal systematically collects and responds to staff, parent, and student concerns.

Indicator 9: The principal appropriately acknowledges the meaningful achievements of others.

Indicator 10: All staff members, classified and certified, are able to communicate openly with one another and say how they feel.

Indicator 11: The individual abilities, knowledge, and experience of all staff members are fully used.

Indicator 12: Conflict between various individuals (teachers, parents, students) is resolved openly and effectively, and there is a genuine feeling of respect for one another among these groups.

Indicator 13: The entire school community can articulate and is committed to the vision and mission of the school.

Indicator 14: Staff members can express their views openly without fear of ridicule or retaliation and permit others to do the same.

Indicator 15: Staff members can get help from one another and give help without being concerned about hidden agendas.

Indicator 16: The school climate is characterized by openness and respect for individual differences.

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Habit 5: Being a Contributor

To foster your teachers' feelings of satisfaction and productivity pay attention to their needs: Be a contributor. A contributor is a *servant-leader, encourager, and enabler whose utmost priority is making a contribution to the success of others*. "If there is a single tool a principal should have, it is a mirror. Looking in that mirror, the principal can find the person who more than any other is both responsible for and accountable for the feelings of satisfaction and productivity among staff, students, and patrons. (Kelly, 1980, p. 53)

Get the right people on board, confront the brutal facts, and establish a culture of discipline in which doing the right thing is built into the culture.

—Collins (2001, p. 88)

What do teachers need in order to be productive and satisfied employees? Money, benefits, and job security are certainly high priorities. In reality, if money and benefits were the *only* prerequisites for creating a productive teaching force, our vast urban school districts would be posting achievement gains that are off the charts. While making a living is essential, teachers need more than generous paychecks to become peak performers, especially given the current demands of teaching. (See the case study on exhausted teachers in Chapter 5.)

Consideration of others—an ethic of caring—is fundamental to moral leadership.

—Blase & Kirby
(2000, p. 116)

When Lola Malone, principal of John Tyson Elementary School in Alabama, was asked to mentor new principals in her district, she thought carefully about what advice she could give them that would *guarantee* their success as leaders. She drew on her experience as a "contributor," a principal who is willing to provide what teachers need to be effective. The list that Lola passes on to her new administrative colleagues is shown in Figure 1.3. When the needs in this list are met, teachers can devote themselves to achieving the school's mission with minds, bodies, and spirits that are free of anger, distress, depression, exhaustion, and confusion.

Figure 1.3 The Needs of Teachers: Lola's List

All teachers need to feel that their principals respect them as individuals and will protect their privacy.

All teachers need to know that their principals will deal with their problems directly and privately.

All teachers need to be given credit for their ideas, creativity, hard work, and willingness to take on additional responsibilities (both privately and publicly, both orally and in writing).

All teachers need to know that their principals will not jump to conclusions or make hasty decisions, particularly when their welfare is under consideration.

All teachers need principals who are available and listen to them.

All teachers need to have reasons and explanations given when plans derail, problems occur, requests cannot be fulfilled, or promises are broken.

All teachers need to have all of the information and facts put on the table and to be kept apprised of what is happening in their schools.

All teachers need to know that when possible and where appropriate, when decisions are made that affect them collectively or as individuals, they will be given opportunities for input and discussion.

All teachers need to know that their principals are fair and will not show favoritism to an individual or group.

All teachers need to know that their principals will keep open minds when they advance ideas or make suggestions for change.

All teachers need to know that they will be a part of the team when parent and student problems are under discussion, problems are being solved, or plans are being developed.

All teachers need to feel supported in their disciplinary decisions with students.

All teachers need to know that their principals will admit mistakes, sincerely apologize when wrong, and then move forward.

All teachers need to know that their principals will always send parents to them first if there are questions or concerns about what they are doing in their classrooms.

All teachers need to know they can bring problems and concerns regarding their principals' performance to the forefront and that such problems and concerns will be addressed honestly, immediately, and positively.

All teachers need to know that their principals value their personal lives and when appropriate and possible will take them into consideration when making requests.

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If the concept of “serving” strikes you as contradictory to the assertive stance needed for dealing with problem teachers, you have confused it with “subservience.” Your servant-leadership will enable teachers to be productive and successful in their work and

When I finally realized that one of the many hats I wear is that of “helper,” I began having more success. I think teachers began to see that I was human and wanted to meet their needs. Not that I was 100% successful, but I made a lot more headway once their needs were met.

—Principal C. J. Huff

also strengthen your influence as a leader. Nevertheless, in the short term, you may feel some resentment about “waiting on” staff members who are determined to undermine your leadership and even destroy your school. If so, I can relate. Fortunately, however, I learned very early in the principalship that looking out for Number 1 is a surefire way to destroy morale *and* self-destruct as a leader. If the needs listed in Figure 1.3 are *not* met (especially in the face of ris-

ing expectations and diminishing resources), a vicious cycle of anger, distress, exhaustion, and confusion sets in. Abused, disrespected, and demeaned subordinates often become the very angry, troubled, exhausted, and confused teachers that we later lament. [Note: For a more comprehensive description and discussion of contributors, see McEwan, 2003, pp. 151–162.]

Habit 6: Conducting Assertive Interventions

Habit 6 is focused on making teachers aware of behaviors that are standing in the way of *their* productivity in the classroom as well as the achievement of your schoolwide mission. Various terms have been used to describe honest, direct approaches to helping people confront inappropriate behaviors. They include, among others, “telling the truth in love” (Autry, 1991), “tough love” (Tough Love International, 2004), “fierce conversations” (Scott, 2002), and “motivational interviewing” (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Telling the truth in love requires courage and a moral commitment to confront reality. This down-home proverb cited by essayist

Barbara Kingsolver (1995) conveys a colorful mental picture: “If you never stepped on anybody’s toes, you never been for a walk” (p. 45). To deal with dysfunctional teachers, you must “step on their toes.” Susan Scott (2002) calls encounters in which we do this, “fierce conversations.” She defines a fierce conversation thus: “one in which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real” (p. 7). Often when we meet with difficult teachers, we end up talking too much and saying all the wrong things. We ask inane questions or sugarcoat the discussion with ill-advised compliments to avoid hurting teachers’ feelings. We often don’t get to the point or tell the truth. We babble all around the elephant in the middle of our office.

To help you confront the elephants in your school, I have packaged the applicable features of tough love, telling the truth in love, fierce conversations, and motivational interviewing into a systematic plan called an *assertive intervention* (AI). An AI is a communication tool to help you say what needs to be said to

teachers who are angry, troubled, exhausted, or just plain confused, and to do it with truth, respectfulness, *and* confidence. Chapter 2 describes the characteristics of AIs and provides sample interventions as models.

Habit 7: Doing It Today

One of my favorite columnists, now deceased, was Sydney Harris (n.d.) of the *Chicago Daily News*. He said, “Regret for the things we did can be tempered by time; it is regret for the things we did not do that is inconsolable.”

There is never an “ideal” time to confront teachers who are behaving inappropriately, but if in doubt, do it today. Some have suggested that it is important to first earn the trust of teachers,

Courage isn’t the absence of fear; it’s proceeding in spite of it. Not holding back something you know needs to be said, telling the truth in the face of peril and pitfall. It’s being candid when it may be dangerous. It’s going ahead and doing it or saying it even if it’s uncomfortable.

—Hawley (1993, p. 133)

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proving that you care about them, before you attempt to confront them about inappropriate behavior. But I submit there are three crucial windows of opportunity for dealing with the most serious problems: (1) when you begin a new principalship, b) during the induction of newly hired or transferred teachers, or c) the moment a new problem arises or you notice a recurrence of a previous problem with any teacher.

Confronting fellow professionals, whether brand-new hires or teachers with decades of experience, can take its toll on your emotional, spiritual, and physical energy, to say nothing of the time

It is often easier to avoid a problem than to feel an obligation to do something to solve it. As teachers we are trained to help students, but principals really need a different set of skills to work with adults so as not to make people feel that you are trying to change them.

—Principal Mark Frankel

it steals from nurturing positive aspects of your school's culture. But don't delay. I subscribe to the advice given by Pritchett and Pound (1993) in their small, but powerful book, *High-Velocity Culture Change: A Handbook for Managers*: "Start out fast and keep trying to pick up speed. *Leave skid marks*" (p. 43).

If nontenured teachers are behaving inappropriately, talk to them immediately. If you wait too long, they will conclude that you haven't noticed or don't care. One hopes that brand-new teachers

have paid close attention to the expectations presented in your orientation as well as the code of conduct in the teacher handbook, but my rule of thumb is, "Assume nothing." I learned that lesson the hard way.

I vividly remember a closed session with the school board when they were deliberating over my recommendation to dismiss a probationary custodian. Among other notable deficiencies, he consistently "forgot" to shovel snow off the front walks. I had issued countless verbal reminders and written reprimands about the importance of attending to the requirements of his job description. However, one especially testy board member felt I hadn't been explicit enough. "Did you *specifically* tell him or put a statement in

writing that spelled out that his failure to perform these tasks could result in his being fired?” he asked.

I had to admit that I hadn't put it quite that bluntly. “He's a probationary employee whose job is dependent on the quality of his work during the probation period,” I gently argued. “Shouldn't he know that?” The board member was not buying it, and he convinced his colleagues that this employee deserved another chance. I learned a very important lesson during that meeting. Never assume that employees (whether custodians *or* teachers) know that their inappropriate behavior *can* result in unsatisfactory ratings, transfers to other schools, nonrenewal of contracts, or even dismissal proceedings. Lay it out in a brutally honest fashion if you sense that any of these possibilities might be forthcoming in the future.

If the behavior of experienced tenured employees suddenly becomes erratic, pay attention. The longer you neglect problem teachers, the guiltier you will feel every time you see them “doing it” again, thereby creating an additional problem—the deterioration of your own self-respect. Never make the mistake of thinking that your teachers' *personal* problems have nothing to do with their *professional* problems. “Well, he may be a chronic alcoholic, *but* he is a brilliant teacher.” What about the student, parent, and staff complaints that are spilling out of his personnel file? Being a good teacher is far more than teaching a few lessons well. Don't fall into the trap of believing that confronting employees about inappropriate behavior constitutes meddling. Don't be paralyzed by the fear that your teachers won't like you if you confront them. You have a moral obligation to intervene. You were hired to fulfill a moral imperative; do it with character.

I was a brand-new principal, taking my first walk through the building. I began across the hall from my office in the classroom of a male, upper-grade teacher, John. He was seated behind his desk at the front of the room and had a male student on his lap. The students in the room seemed relaxed, and neither John nor the student looked embarrassed. I hurried to my office and called the superintendent to make an appointment as soon as possible.

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I was angry. It was the kind of righteous anger one feels when a trust has been betrayed and a standard violated. Sergioivanni (2000) calls it “leadership by outrage,” (p. 277). My meeting with the superintendent brought both good and bad news. The good news was that he would back my efforts to deal with this troubled teacher. The bad news was that I couldn’t fire him the next day! The good news was that his inappropriate touching of students finally stopped—after three confrontations, each one escalating the stakes to a new level. The bad news was that in addition to being deeply troubled, John was also a terrible teacher. My mission was difficult, but not impossible. I had no choice but to accept it. I decided not to worry about the past. I had no control over it. I could only deal with the teacher today. So I did.

SUMMING UP

Dealing with dysfunctional teachers requires character, assertiveness, communication skills, a servant’s heart, the support of a positive or improving school culture, and the courage to confront inappropriate behavior the first time it becomes evident. Your mission, and if you aspire to be a highly effective principal, you have no choice but to accept it, is to take on the challenge of dealing with teachers who are angry, troubled, exhausted, or just plain confused.