

Back to Basics, II

Disciplinary Response

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Last month, I covered the principles that underlie our disciplinary system. Now I'll focus on the disciplinary response within our system and then talk about some of the "unwritten rules" that are to any process what oil is to the combustion engine.

The first official response is an Official Warning. A Warning, which may be either verbal or written, is issued when a student has done something, or a pattern of somethings, that will create a larger problem if continued. A Warning effectively tells a student, "There is a problem or a potential problem here. If the problem or potential problem goes away, then everyone will be happy, and no administrative action will be needed. If the problem doesn't go away, disciplinary action will result." Examples of actions that result in Official Warnings include inappropriate language and unauthorized absence from required meetings.

The next level of disciplinary response is General Behavioral Probation. A student is given General Behavioral Probation when he or she has done something, or a pattern of somethings, that clearly violates the school's core values. Examples of actions that result in this level of probation are cutting class and violating the Appropriate Use of Technology Policy. General Behavioral Probation, which may be issued either verbally or in writing, is usually assigned for the duration of the school year and effectively tells the student that there is a real problem, which, if repeated, could call into question the fit between the school and the student.

The next level is Advanced Behavioral Probation. In most cases, a student is placed on Advanced Behavioral Probation when he or she has been on General Behavioral Probation and has done something new that is similar to, or is the same as, the act that caused the original probation; or has violated another core value of the school; or has committed an egregious act (for example, inappropriate language to, or inappropriate physical contact with, another student) for which General Behavioral Probation is an insufficient response. The duration of Advanced Behavioral Probation is at the discretion of the division head.

Students on Advanced Probation are told, usually in a face-to-face meeting including the parents, that there are now serious questions about the fit between the student and the school, and that if there is another significant action or a pattern of lesser actions that "resonate" the act or actions that caused the Advanced Probation, the student can be asked to leave the school without further process. As I tell the student and his or her parents in these meetings, the last qualifier, "without further process," means that "If there is a violation of Advanced Probation, I can effectively do whatever I want without the need for further thought and discussion, so don't put yourself in a position where your future here depends upon my judgment call."

Most people on Advanced Probation shape up and become good citizens. Over the years a few have not, and I know that some of the perception of uneven application of discipline that



some students, parents, and faculty have evolved from cases in which, for the sake of argument, two different students on Advanced Probation commit approximately the same infraction, and one student leaves and another is given another (or what some would view as “yet another”) chance.

Here’s what happens Behind Closed Doors when Jean and I have to decide what to do in delicate matters like this. We always consider the following factors: What do our guts tell us about this kid? Is there an adult in the community who sees something positive within this kid and will speak for the student? Do the parents in question See The World, and us, and the kid, in approximately the way we do? What are the recommendations of the faculty involved in the matter and of the division head and/or Dean of Students? And always, always, what is the right thing to do for this kid right now?

A few years ago Mike Haykin and John Rudolph, then our Director of Facilities, spoke up for a kid who was on Advanced Probation and who then messed up not once more, but twice. Technically, the kid should have been expelled. But the judgment call Jean and I make on kids who are on Advanced Probation is just that, a call of judgment. We felt then, and feel now, that when people of the quality of Mike Haykin and John Rudolph, whose insights into young people have been confirmed by Life again and again, see the seeds of success where others see only failure, one has to think carefully before cutting the cord. We kept this kid, and he shaped up and graduated.

On the other hand, when our guts tell us that the kid won’t “get it” at SAAS, and when no adult is willing to stand up and say that this kid is a gamble worth taking, and when we and the parents and/or the kid are on completely different pages, then we

have a situation which my grandfather described for me years ago, “When there is only sand to build upon, your house will not stand.”

The downside of a system that allows a judgment call is that such a system is never as “clear” or as “strong” as one that covers every contingency with a rule (as, for example, “zero tolerance” policies do). Another downside of judgment calls is that people are human and will make mistakes, and Jean and I have made our share. However, as someone once said of democracy, “It’s a terribly inefficient system, but all the others are worse.” And there is nothing more relentlessly destructive of the human spirit than systems that do not allow human judgment.

