Podcast: Consistency in Classroom Management Could Imply That One Size Fits All

“While teachers use interventions to allow students to catch up with their learning results and use differentiation to make sure that learning tasks are appropriate, when it comes to behavior we often default to consistency as a panacea.” -(Dave Whitaker)

Consistency is built when students sense the teacher’s usual, expected teacher behavior. Flexibility emerges when the teacher changes from that approach in response to a situation or individual student’s needs. Explore verbal structures teachers can use across a continuum of giving, sharing, or keeping the decision-making voice in a classroom.

Read “Consistency – or maybe a bit of flexible consistency?” by Dave Whitaker here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve [Intro]

Hello, and welcome to the Teacher Edition of Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud. Teaching is a complex and rewarding journey, and I'm always eager to explore the many ways teachers engage students in their learning. This podcast is dedicated to supporting you, the teacher, as you inspire and guide your students. Thanks for joining me. I'm excited you're here.

[00:00:30.450] – Steve

Consistency in classroom management could imply that one size fits all. Dave Whitaker raised that concern about consistency in a blog post titled. "Consistency – or maybe a little bit of flexible consistency?" The link to his post is in this podcast lead-in. Here's a quote from his blog: "A great behavior policy should not be overreliant on harsh punishments and high rewards. It should be supportive and flexible, with the drive towards intrinsic motivation to achieve high standards of acceptable social behavior, both in and out of the classroom. We do not want to create a society where appropriate behavior is predicated on the threat and fear of punishment, but we do want high standards and great behavior." Whitaker points out that teachers use interventions to allow pupils to catch up with their phonics or their writing, that teachers use personalization and differentiation to make sure that the work we give students is appropriate so that students can thrive and be successful at many levels. Yet, when it comes to behavior, we frequently default to consist consistency as the panacea. Whittaker suggests flexible consistency. Flexible consistency allows us to make reasonable adjustments and to think differently, but without compromising on standards and expectations.

[00:02:19.470] – Steve

We look beyond the behavior at the emotions and the feelings, considering the cause and the influences that drive the behavior. We attempt to the best of our ability, to deal with these in a way that both supports and challenges our pupils. I find consistency and flexibility to be observable when I'm in outstanding teachers classrooms. Students know what to expect from the teacher. There's a calmness generated from consistent expectations that the teacher has for students. And the students have for the teacher. Consistency isn't consistency of consequences. It's consistency of actions, attitudes, and procedures. When you have routines each day, and you react with patience each day, and you treat students as fairly as possible, then you are consistent and students know what to expect. It's important to note that fair does not mean the same. Actually, treating students the same can be completely unfair. Flexibility requires knowing your students. Relationships with students build easier in a consistent environment. Relationships increase knowing, and they drive flexibility, and the relationship grows deeper. It's a positive spiral. Whitaker adds, "We remain consistent in our expectations, standards, and relationships, but flexible with our solutions and support. Therefore, we focus on the cause of inappropriate behavior rather than the symptoms.

[00:04:17.750] – Steve

We move away from a behaviorist approach, a reliance on rewards and sanctions, to a relational approach where individual needs are considered." One way to look at consistency and flexibility in your classroom management is to identify the verbal approaches you use with students, the verbal skills that establish a decision-making process. Consider a continuum that ranges from the teacher giving a lot of decision-making to students on one end to the teacher sharing decision-making with students in the middle and the teacher keeping decision-making on the other end. At times, we as teachers are at each of the spots on the continuum, but

consistency creates a usual response that students grow to expect. Consistency is built when students sense the usual expected teacher behavior. Flexibility emerges when the teacher changes from that approach in response to a situation or individual students needs. Let’s take a look at different verbal structures teachers can use and identify where those structures fall across the continuum of giving, sharing, or keeping the decision-making power.

[00:05:54.630] – Steve

The first strategy I’ll look at is called the problem-solving inquiry. There’s generally two steps in this process. One, a problem is defined either by the teacher or the student. And by problem, we could mean opportunity as well as problem. And then in the second step, the teacher either ask the students for possible solutions or ideas, or the teacher offers possible solutions or ideas. The problem solving inquiry is a strong power giving strategy, and at its strongest power giving strategy, the teacher is asking the student to define the problem and asking the student to come up with a solution. In its broadest sense, it could sound like this: “What do you see as the problem?” And what actions will you take? The problem-solving inquiry moves more towards power sharing when the teacher defines the problem, especially if the teacher chooses to define it more narrowly. And the teacher is now offering solutions for the student to choose from. Here’s a series of examples – consider how they move from most giving of the decision-making power to the students to a more shared decision-making role. We need to plan a community service project for our homeroom. What might we do?

[00:07:47.020] – Steve

So the teacher has defined the problem, but made it very open by asking the students for possibilities. We need to plan a community service project in response to homelessness. What might we do? Notice here the teacher has moved more towards a

shared decision-making by the teacher defining the problem more narrowly, connecting it to homelessness, but still open-ended in the students coming up with ideas. We need to plan a community service project in response to homelessness. Should we explore the issues of nutrition, mental health, housing, or employment? In this case, the teacher is now limited somewhat more by the teacher giving the options. We need to plan a community service project in response to homelessness. Should we explore the issues of nutrition or housing? By offering fewer options, the teacher has moved more from the power giving spot on the continuum to a power sharing. Here's the problem solving inquiry applied in another example. There's too little being accomplished when we are in the independent stations. What ideas do you have for improving that? This would probably fall pretty much in the shared area in that the teacher has to find the problem but opened up to the students for possible solutions.

[00:09:22.750] – Steve

There is too little being accomplished when we are at the independent stations. We could try setting goals for what needs to be accomplished at the start. Maybe we could set a challenge with a partner for what we'll accomplish, or try working at our desk instead of at the stations. What do you think? Now the teacher has narrowed down to three options for the students to select from. The problem-solving inquiry can also be used as a power-keeping strategy. This occurs when the teacher defines the problem and offers unequal options. In other words, the student is forced to accept the option that the teacher once implemented. Example, you can work more responsibly on the independent task or have them assigned as additional homework. The teacher using this strategy is confident that the students will select to work more responsibly rather than have the additional homework. There is a caution, however. If I offer the choice, a student may choose the option that I don't want, and then I'm stuck having

to follow through. I learned this early in my teaching career when I informed 6th-grader Jimmy that he could finish his work or go to the office.

[00:10:52.050] – Steve

With that, Jimmy picked up his books, headed to the door, turned and said, See you later, Mr. Barkley. I felt a little foolish when the principal came to my classroom and wanted to know why Jimmy was in the office. A second verbal strategy that we can take a look at is called the contingent action proposal. It's mostly a power sharing skill. It's a form of making a deal. It often follows a if-then, that structure. If the contingent action proposal requires a student action to happen before the teacher action, then it falls more on the power keeping side of the strategy. Example, if you bring your work in by Monday, I will give you full credit. In this case, the student has to perform first by bringing the work on Monday for the teacher to follow through with her part of the deal and giving the student full credit. If the contingent action proposal requires the teacher to take action first, then it falls more on the power giving side of the continuum. Example, if I postpone the exam until Monday, will you use the time over the weekend to practice and study? This example more on the power giving side because the teacher, in effect, could get burned, meaning she postpones the test, but the student doesn't follow through and use the time.

[00:12:44.730] – Steve

In my experience, I've often found that when there's a student I'm having difficulty connecting with, the contingent action proposal where I take the action first, it's like I go out on the limb and I give the the saw, can be a way to break through with that student who is not trusting of teacher authority. Two other verbal skills to consider that are on the power-keeping side of our continuum are disapproval and authority. When a teacher makes takes a disapproval statement to a

student, the action that the student is expected to take is implied. For example, the teacher might say, “the noise level is too high.” That disapproval for what’s currently occurring informs the student of the need to change behavior. When a teacher uses a authority statement, the behavior expected of the student is now spelled out. As an example, “we need to complete the assignment. Let’s work in silence until everyone has finished.” It is often valuable to provide a reason for your authority when you use it. Most of us find it easier to comply with authority when we know the reason that the directive is being given. Example of that in an authority statement.

[00:14:35.220] – Steve

“There are many new vocabulary words in this unit. I will introduce five words each day this week, and you will complete a homework assignment each night with the five new words.” Take a look at the conscious verbal skills you’re using to present to students either a giving, sharing, or keeping classroom management style. If you put the continuum of giving, sharing, keeping on your desk, you might stop several times during the day, think back to the last period or two, and note where on that scale your comments to students fell. A teacher lacking consistency is moving around on the continuum to often, and therefore, students are unclear what to expect. A teacher with a consistent style is now prepared to consider when he or she needs to consciously move from that style. If you are finding yourself struggling with a student or group of students, you might consider consciously changing with that student to a different power structure. Here’s just two examples. I worked with a high school teacher who had a very strong power-keeping style. That led many students in his class to be successful because they knew that the purpose of his power-keeping was to create their success, and they followed and complied with his request.

[00:16:33.770] – Steve

There was a student that he struggled with and butted heads rather frequently. And when he and that student met with a peer advisory group. It was teachers and administrators who met with a teacher and a student who were struggling. They came up with a modification that gave more decision-making power to the student. Matter of fact, it went as far as to say the student could decide whether or not she came to class. If she chose not to come to class, she had to report to the library for that period. At the same time, she was responsible to always be in class for an experiment, always be in class for an exam, and to always complete all the assignments with no responsibility on the teacher's part to chase after her or follow up. Interestingly enough, the teacher reported the student was in class early, moving ahead from that time, excited to inform other students that she didn't need to be there, but she was there and doing the work. Example of a teacher changing his style in order to increase the success of that individual student. I had a reverse process in my own work with middle school students, and my style tended to be more on the power sharing, even onto the giving side of it.

[00:18:20.590] – Steve

At times, I found students who could not be successful, who weren't making the right choices with that structure. And so there were particular individual students that I had to go to a contract basis with in order to put requirements on that students for the behaviors, the places they need to be and when they had to hand things in, while other students had the flexibility to make those choices on their own. That was a forced change in my style that led to the student being more successful. Most of our classroom management decisions are made unconsciously. When we're struggling, it's a great time to stop and think consciously about what my normal responses are, and when do I want to experiment with a different approach with a group of students or a given student. Sometimes teachers who want to be more on the power giving

side find out that they have to start with their students more on the power keeping side. When that's the case, it's important to consider how you would move step by step to give students more of the decision-making power, because the students may not be prepared to make that big step from teacher as power keeper to teacher as power giver.

[00:20:04.050] – Steve

Take the time to reflect and consciously decide.

[00:20:10.180] – Steve

I'll close out with some words from Dave Whitaker. "Consistency is therefore a great word to adopt when associated with an adult's relationship with a child. Consistency can give out a message of fairness and positivity so that the children know where they stand, and this allows them to trust and be trusted." Whittaker states, "Consistency is great even when it's flexible." Thanks for listening. I'd love to hear your thoughts on flexible consistency. You can reach me at barkleypd.com.

[00:20:55.280] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.