

# Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

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## LEARNING CLIMATE

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*If learning is what we value, then we ought to value the process of learning as much as the result of learning.*

People are attracted to activities where they feel free of psychological or emotional pain. Learning is promoted in a climate where people feel safe and cared for. The adage, “*People don’t care what you know until they know you care,*” is applicable. When working with one middle school, William Glasser stated,

The teachers stopped almost all coercion—an approach that was radically different from the way most of these students had been treated since kindergarten. When we asked the students why they were no longer disruptive and why they were beginning to work in school, over and over they said, “You care about us.” (Phi Delta Kappan, April, 1997, p. 601)

This idea of communicating a caring interest to those with whom we work was first documented in a classic study on human relations and is known as the “Hawthorne Effect.” It emanated from a study that took place in the late 1920’s at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant near Chicago. Researchers went into the factory to see if, by increasing room lighting for a group of employees, the productivity would increase. Improvements did indeed seem to boost worker output. But much to their surprise, when the researchers analyzed a comparable group with no change in the lighting, the productivity also improved. Further study and analysis of this puzzling result showed that productivity increased because the workers were delighted that management was showing some kind of interest in them. The very fact that workers knew they were receiving attention motivated them to try to improve. *The workers felt that management cared about them and that they were valued.* Similarly, a young person who feels valued by an adult reaps the benefit of the *Hawthorne Effect*.

People have difficulty understanding that someone cares for them when coercion is used. W. Edwards Deming, the American who showed Japan in the post World War II years how to improve quality, understood this. One of his core principles was to “*Drive out fear.*” Deming understood that motivation, performance, productivity, and quality are optimum when coercion is at a minimum and when a trusting, caring climate is at the maximum.

People want to feel they belong. They ordinarily will not congregate where they feel uncomfortable. In a classroom where the teacher and class have a forced relationship, the student who disrupts the class becomes a hero. The reason is that a coercive climate is an adversarial one. In a climate of positive relationships, the disrupting student does not receive support from the other students.

There are as many kinds of relationships as there are people in the world. *Voluntary* relationships are chosen as, for example, between friends. However, classroom relationships are *involuntary*. Students are mostly assigned to their classes and thereby the relationships between teachers and students, and between students and students, are not chosen. A classroom conducive to learning is one where good relations exist between teacher and student and among students themselves. In

these classrooms where students feel emotionally and psychologically safe, involuntary relationships become voluntary ones. The reason is that students *want* to be there.

Where learning is promoted, certain activities are unacceptable. These include ridiculing, threatening, forcing, compelling, punishing, bribing, manipulating, blaming, complaining, putting down, nagging, and badgering. We rarely use these coercive tactics with our friends. Coercion is simply not effective in influencing others while trying to keep good relationships.

## **KEY POINTS**

**Motivation is optimal when coercion is at a minimum and a trusting, caring climate is at the maximum.**

**Involuntary relationships become voluntary when people are where they *want* to be. Learning is promoted in this type of climate.**

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