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## Motivation: Revisiting the Practitioner's Perspective

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### Introduction

This article addresses some of the issues confronting teachers and those in the helping profession who are attempting to reach and impact students and youths who seem lazy, unmoved and unmotivated.

As there are many helpful resource books on motivation that are readily available, this article will focus on a single dimension that is not often discussed. It is also one that is within the control of the teacher and the practitioner – that of themselves. Answered honestly, the hard but essential self-reflection questions will help keep one authentic and burnt-out proof. The 3R mnemonic tool, the **Refrain-Reflect-Reframe Model**, can be extremely helpful for keeping the teacher/practitioner sane and resilient when faced with seemingly resistant and totally unmovable youths.

## Are These Your Students?

- **Bored Billy;** he doesn't see the need to stifle his loud yawns which draw quite a few giggles from his group mates. When reprimanded, he retorts that YOU are absolutely boring.
- **Forgetful Felicia;** she tends to treat everything you tell her with an air of nonchalance. When confronted, she shrugs it off with a "whatever!"
- **Listless Lily;** she slouches in her seat and seems more keen in looking at the ground than paying attention to what you have to say. The dismissal bell, however, transforms her into a bolting deer out of the door!
- **Terror Terrence;** he snarls when he talks and wears a perpetual scowl. You find it almost impossible to extract even a hint of a smile from him, not to mention cooperation.

Why do youths and adolescents, supposedly brimming with hormones and energy, at times act so lethargic, unenthusiastic and dispirited? It is frustrating, to say the least, when well-intentioned efforts are greeted by resistance and apathy.

A multitude of reasons has been offered for their (mis)behaviour ranging from hormonal imbalances to relational issues. While these may be valid, this article will only focus on bolstering that singular aspect that is within our direct control and access – OURSELVES.

## Knowing Ourselves

It is imperative that any effort to motivate or direct students towards a goal, no matter how noble, begins with us taking a hard look at the mirror. Military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu said, "Know thyself, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories." After all, we may be the problem or the cause of it! In this light, let's take a journey of self-reflection and exercise some needed introspection by asking several pointed questions of ourselves.

## What Drives Me?

***Do I have a genuine desire for our students and youths to succeed? Or is there a self-serving motive driving my actions?***

Though basic, these questions must be addressed if we are to be truly effective. Students are a sensitive lot, especially attuned to fakeness in adults. When teens feel, or perceive, we are using them for our own ends, our gallant efforts may be negated. So a good starting point is that we genuinely want them to do well. Period. No strings attached.

When motivating youths, we should be looking out for their best interests, not ours. We help them not because we look good or get a bonus when they succeed. We do not draw our self-validation from our students' successes. *(Similarly, parents should question whether they are living out their unfulfilled dreams vicariously through their children's achievements.)*

Of course, we are delighted when our students succeed. The point is that we do not depend on their response to feel good about ourselves. If we anchor our self-validation on how our students respond to us, their challenging behaviour and defiance may push the wrong buttons and start a negative escalation of responses. If we do not check ourselves, this may erode our confidence or self-worth, make us feel ineffective or wish to quit.

Indeed, doing this work must stem from no lesser than what some declare a calling. Neither should we serve out of obligation or pity – our actions may reek of guilt or condescension. Neither works well.

The bottomline is, if our personal motivation for working with youths is anything else but a genuine desire for their success, maybe we should seriously reconsider our continued involvement with youths. If we feel more fulfilled doing something else, maybe we should be doing that instead. After all, we too, are individuals with potential and we owe it to ourselves to be the best that we can possibly be.

## What Affects Me?

Sincerity of motive alone, however essential, does not guarantee success in our efforts to motivate. We need to be aware of how our emotions may have coloured the situation. We need to ask,

### ***How am I personally affected?***

This question examines our personal feelings, particularly after a negative episode. Perhaps it was an unpleasant encounter that has riled our nerves. Or we may have been smarting from some unkind remarks spewed by the youth we're trying to help.

**Reminder:** never take such remarks *personally*.

But we are only human. When traces of resentment stir in our hearts, it's time for more reflection. Any bitterness, if allowed to fester, will incapacitate our efforts to reach youths, and end in failure. It is helpful to speak with a professional colleague or mentor who can provide objective feedback.

I remember feeling increasingly upset with a group of boisterous boys to the point where I dreaded entering their classroom. Once, after another draining session, I was seething with anger. An astute colleague noticed and challenged me to identify the main reason for my negative feelings. After some thought, I narrowed it down to my perception of being disrespected, and my self-worth being attacked. I then did a rethink of the group, redirected my emotions and subsequently went on to achieve some great goals with them. A sense of professionalism demands that we deal with our personal feelings, especially when they interfere with our efforts to impact youths. Negative emotions can dissipate or deplete our energy. Dealing effectively with our own issues helps us dispel the wounded feelings and redirect our stamina on helping the youths instead.

### ***How are our students and youths affected?***

Our words and actions create an emotional impact on our students. We should not presume to know how they feel without verifying their responses. This is easier said than done since youths do not necessarily share their innermost thoughts freely

with adults. Beyond reading their body language, we may have to resort to guesswork unless we have established other ways of eliciting feedback based on the strength of our relationships with them.

We are fallible; often making mistakes without realizing them. Every now and then, we need to ask, "How am I doing? How can I do better?" Be prepared for humble pie and brutally frank replies - but don't take them personally. Incidentally, the way you accept and handle your mistakes and shortcomings may be the very role modeling your youths need to overcome their own issues.

Note too that teens may not be very adept at interpreting and expressing emotions as they go through the throes of adolescent development. It's always prudent to leave room for misinterpreted cues and responses.

Always stay humble, ready to ask and listen. By doing so, you provide a crucial and significant learning experience for youths. **Many youths learn more from what you do than from what you say.**

## 3Rs Model: Refrain-Reflect-Reframe

The 3Rs Model is a useful tool to commit to memory for instinctive practice. It can help us stay sane, cool, calm and resilient when confronted with nonchalance, defiance or non-compliance.

### 1. Refrain – Do not act from impulse

This is a measured and disciplined step that resists the urge of taking a swipe or doing something that reaps only regrets later. We should refrain from:

- Taking things personally or snapping back,
- Jumping to conclusions;
- Shaming the student or youth; and
- Making empty threats that we don't have the ability or intention of carrying out, thus affecting our credibility.

### 2. Reflect – Take time to think

The practice of self-reflection is indispensable in our pursuit of effectiveness as motivators of youths. We are to reflect on:

- Our reactions;
- Our feelings;
- Student's unspoken cause; and
- Trends and patterns

Step back and look at the big picture. Start with ourselves and move on to the bigger schema. Look out for trends or repeated patterns that show up. Have we done our background checks? Have we viewed things from the student's perspective? Have we probed into the student's possible inability to comply with our expectations or instructions?

### 3. Reframe – Consider other options

The key in unblocking motivational obstacles often lies in casting aside our initial presuppositions about someone and creating a new mental frame. It also recognizes that we may have unknowingly collected biases from our past experiences. To be effective, we need to confront these prejudices so as to not create barriers. In this light, we are to reframe on:

- Our view of student;
- Our student's strengths; and
- Resources available

For example, instead of viewing Terrence as a terror, let's try seeing him as a young person who does not know how to express his fears. Who knows, we may discover that Terrence has survived despite the tremendous odds stacked against him. His scowls and harsh words are possibly desperate attempts to protect from being hurt further.

Similarly, with Bored Billy, we may view his antics as clumsy attention-gatherers. Probing deeper, we may instead discover a fear of failure beneath his indifferent facade. Thus far, Billy has actually survived by resorting to his improvised methods.

In these instances, both of our changed responses ensued from a reframing of our mental models. In fact, both Terrence and Billy have deployed strengths, crude they may be, in response to their respective circumstances. We can thus appeal to these strengths instead of latching on their weaknesses.

## Conclusion

The work of helping students and youths to reach greater heights is tough. To save ourselves unnecessary pain and anguish, I strongly urge that we resort first to disciplined self-reflection. Taking the first step in the realm where we have the ability to enact change makes obvious sense. As in all things, practice makes permanent. This is also true with the exercise of refraining, reflection and reframing within the context of motivation.