A Classroom Management Checklist for Addressing Challenging Behaviors

1. Be in control of you and operate in a calm, intentional manner.

   a. Take stock of your physical and emotional baseline each day, and do everything you can to put yourself in as good a position as possible before you start the day.

   When it comes to your interactions with students, everything about you counts. Think of all the factors that affect your mood and performance and work on everything you can control (exercise, sleep, entertainment choices, etc.). If you know that you are not physically or emotionally on your A game, be aware of that and temper your responses accordingly.

   When you are in the moment working with a challenging student, work to be mindful of your own emotional state and your nonverbal communications. Develop techniques to remain calm and neutral (breathing techniques are great).

   b. Watch out for control loops.

   Control loops are an easy trap to fall into, especially for high-achieving teachers, and they can make you behave in ways that are counterproductive to maintaining a healthy classroom culture.

   Example: A teacher works hard to prepare a fun, engaging lesson. Somewhere during the whole-group introduction, most of the class is engaged, but one student gets up, walks across the room, and begins whispering something to another student. The teacher stops the introduction and tells the student to go back to his seat. The student responds, “I will in a minute. I need to show him something (pointing to his phone).” The teacher repeats the command with more force, the student digs in and responds with more defiance, and a stand-off begins.

   Think of the dynamic of this exchange and the emotions both participants experience. The teacher experiences a loss of control in front of the whole class, and this loss triggers some combination of fear, embarrassment and irritation. The student, responding to changing nonverbal signals that may include some appearance of disgust and judgment (more on that below), responds by guarding his ego and openly defying the directive. This open defiance increases the teacher’s fear, embarrassment and irritation, and the conflict escalates.
c. Food for thought:

“Anytime you voluntarily let up control, in other words cease to cling to yourself, you have an access of power. Because you're wasting energy all the time in self-defense, trying to manage things, trying to force things to conform to your will. The moment you stop doing that, that wasted energy is available. . . . So then the principle is, 'the more you give it away, the more it comes back.'

Now you say, 'I don’t have the courage to give it away. I’m afraid.' You can only overcome that by realizing . . . there is no way [of] holding on to it. . . .

So once you see that you don’t have a prayer and it’s all washed up and that you will vanish and leave not a rag behind, and you really get with that, suddenly you find you have the power, this enormous access of energy. But it’s not power that came to you because you grabbed it, it came in entirely the opposite way, and power that comes to you in that opposite way is power with which you can be trusted." ~Alan Watts

2. Lead with relational authority.

   a. Positional vs. relational authority.

Relational authority is built on human interactions that result in respect and trust, and positional authority is based on status and title.

School employees all have positional authority by virtue of being district employees, but when overreliance on this authority collides with a tough student who has no regard for that kind of authority, a disaster isn’t far off. As much as possible, work to lead the classroom exclusively with relational authority.

3. Check in with your students before each class.

   a. Meet them at the door.

Greeting your students at the door and shaking hands at the beginning of each class is a great way to assess the emotional and physical state of each student. You will be amazed with how quickly you will be able to pick up on students who are having a tough morning, and once you know it, you can adjust accordingly.

   b. Why early mood assessment matters.

In his book Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman writes, “Zillmann has found that when the body is already in a state of edginess . . . and something triggers
an emotional hijacking, the subsequent emotion, whether anger or anxiety, is of especially great intensity. This dynamic is at work when someone becomes enraged. Zillmann sees escalating anger as ‘a sequence of provocations, each triggering an excitatory reaction that dissipates slowly.’ In this sequence every successive anger-provoking thought or perception becomes a minitrigger for amygdala-driven surges of catecholamines, each building on the hormonal momentum of those that went before... A thought that comes later in this buildup triggers a far greater intensity of anger than one that comes at the beginning.”

If you get the feeling that a student is in a bad mood for some unknown reason, consider how you will respond. You don’t need to know why the student is in a bad mood to take the necessary steps to make the room safe for him/her. Creating a safe place for learning includes extending the option for students to withdraw on occasion. And if you see a pattern develop over time, consider bringing it to the attention of a counselor or student advocate.

4. Use the physical space to your advantage.

One of the easiest ways to manage a group is to control where students sit and to assign students to specific working groups, but this is just the beginning. The physical space is important, and you should consider the full sensory experience of your classroom. If you are skeptical about the effect of environment on mood, spend an hour in the ball pit of a Chuck E. Cheese and see how you feel.

5. Establish predictable patterns in your class and stick to them.

As educators, we are working to build order out of chaos. We work on the line between these two states, and both are necessary for a healthy learning environment. Too much order is boring, and too much chaos creates an environment that inhibits learning because it puts students in fight-or-flight mode. Our part of our job is to strike a healthy balance between the two states.

When life causes us to deviate from our established patterns in even small ways, it draws resources that would otherwise be used for other purposes. This can create a heightened sense of awareness and cause our limbic brains to kick in and hijack our thinking.

To understand how this works, think of your daily morning routine and what effect it would have if you unexpectedly found your car door open in the driveway. Even if everything inside your car was in order, the open door would immediately heighten your senses and draw your thinking to the moment.
Work to create a classroom that operates on predictable, logical patterns of interaction. These patterns can be unique to your classroom, but they should be consistent and predictable. Clear, consistent patterns will create a roadmap of interaction that most of your students will be glad to follow. This, in turn, will free up your resources to focus on the small percentage of students who have other ideas about how their time should be spent.

6. Have a planned, scripted response to problem behavior, and follow it.

Plans for responding to problem behaviors include what to say, how to say it, and where to have corrective conversations. You need to have a clear, practiced method for responding to misbehavior and the more you script, the better off your outcomes will generally be, especially at first.

Having thought out a plan to respond to inappropriate behavior increases your own sense of order and equips you to work with confidence in a chaotic, confrontational environment.

Test your plan for responding to a problem behavior.

Does your plan:

a. Take away the audience? If you attempt to confront a student in front of the class, you will get blow-ups. Have a plan for engaging the student privately. One way to do this is to use non-verbal or quiet verbal requests to move the student into the hallway. Another is to move closer to the student so that you can whisper.

b. Establish clear steps that you can remember in the moment? When you engage a student in corrective talk, you have to be prepared for their attempts to change the subject. If you’ve asked a student to step out into the hall, the student may try to engage you publicly in front of the class to avoid you. Have a plan for responding to these tactics and stick to it.

c. Incorporate the power of wait time? You will feel rushed to resolve the matter quickly, but you should resist the urge to cave in. Make your request, ignore behaviors that are nonresponsive, and wait. Be mindful of your nonverbal communications as well. Your stance should be non-threatening, and as much as possible, your expression should be patient and neutral.

d. Incorporate choice? Always offer choice when possible, even if both options are negative. Try not to corner a student by forcing compliance.
When you put a student in a go-with-me or go-against-me state, you invite unwanted, confrontational responses.

e. Include a strategy for dealing with the audience? In a “tough” class, other students may want to jump in and argue on behalf of the target student. Avoid being drawn into a discussion with onlookers by having a prepared response. Your plan for responding to these students might be something as simple as, “I appreciate your willingness to help. Will you please write that down so that I can read it in a few minutes?”

7. Watch out for the past.

One of the hardest things to do when working with challenging young adults is to let go of past infractions. We aren’t programmed this way, and we tend to carry forward negative interactions with students.

As much as possible, let go of prior infractions and try to work in the moment. Young adults are maturing and changing on an almost daily basis, and you should work to keep your understanding of the student current.

8. Avoid causing embarrassment.

The neural pathways we use to handle embarrassment are the same pathways we use to handle life and death situations. Be mindful of all the ways you might embarrass a student, and avoid them at all costs.

For a high school student who can’t read, it may be far less costly for him to tell you where to go and what to do than for him to have to reveal his secret to his peers.

“Incoming signals from the senses let the amygdala scan every experience for trouble. This puts the amygdala in a powerful post in mental life, something like a psychological sentinel, challenging every situation, every perception, with but one kind of question in mind, the most primitive: ‘Is this something I hate? That hurts me? Something I fear?’ If so – if the moment at hand somehow draws a ‘Yes’ – the amygdala reacts instantaneously, like a neural tripwire, telegraphing a message of crisis to all parts of the brain.

... When it sounds an alarm of, say, fear, it sends urgent messages to every major part of the brain: it triggers the secretion of the body’s fight-or-flight hormones, mobilizes the centers for movement, and activates the cardiovascular system, the muscles, and the gut. Other circuits from the amygdala signal the secretion of emergency dollops of the hormone norepinephrine to heighten the reactivity of key brain areas, including those that make the senses more alert, in effect
setting the brain on edge. Additional signals from the amygdala tell the brainstem to fix the face in a fearful expression, freeze unrelated movements the muscles had underway, speed heart rate and raise blood pressure, slow breathing. Others rivet attention on the source of the fear, and prepare the muscles to react accordingly. Simultaneously, cortical memory systems are shuffled to retrieve any knowledge relevant to the emergency at hand, taking precedence over other strands of thought.

... The amygdala’s extensive web of neural connections allows it, during an emotional emergency, to capture and drive much of the rest of the brain – including the rational mind.” – Daniel Goleman, from Emotional Intelligence

9. Avoid expressions of judgment.

When you openly judge or express contempt for a student during correction, you invite the student to build a wall and to lash out against you. Expressions of judgment or contempt are absolutely counterproductive to healthy, growth-minded discipline and should be eliminated. Your personal opinion of the student or the student’s behavior is irrelevant.

Discipline yourself to work through discussions of misbehavior without expressing judgment. No disciplinary consequence is made more effective with expressions of judgment or contempt. An administrator can send a student to DAEP and express nothing but hope and encouragement during the process.

“Because it’s judgment that defeats us.” - Apocalypse Now

10. Listen and learn.

Work on making each one-on-one session with a student a meaningful encounter. If you assign an after-school detention, for example, turn it into an opportunity to learn something about the student. A ten minute listening session over a bag of Cheez-Its and a bottle of water will go a lot farther than you’d think to eliminating future misbehaviors. Listen, ask questions, and learn the student’s story.

“Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us, not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing.” – Rachel Naomi Remen
11. Foster a sense of “us.”

This goes back to our hardwired desire to be part of a group. Use “we” when you talk, and foster a sense of inclusivity as much as possible.

If you are able to develop a sense of “us” with a tough student, that student will be far more likely to work with you and not against you. That student might also influence other students to do the same.

12. Be fair and take complaints of “that’s not fair” seriously.

People have great indifference to the suffering of those who are perceived as being inherently unfair. Consider Bernie Madoff (serving 150 years in prison for fraud) or Martin Shkreli (serving 7 years for fraud - increased Daraprim, a drug used to treat life-threatening infections for people with HIV, from $13.50 per pill to $750 per pill).

When a student says, “That’s not fair,” pay attention. It doesn’t mean that you have to change anything you are doing, but it might mean that you should take a little more time to clarify the underlying why of your actions.

13. Praise positive behavior.

One of the best ways to get a room under control is to start calling out specific, positive behaviors and praising specific students in front of the group. Call students by name and praise them for doing the things you want the entire class to do, and temporarily ignore unwanted behaviors. When you praise the positives, other students will begin doing those things as well. Extend your praise to those students when they become compliant.

When you have corrective conversations, find the positive and talk about it. Stubbornness is a leadership trait, and so is a willingness to stand up for what you believe in. If you are pulling your hair out trying to get a stubborn, obstinate student to do what you want them to do, praise these characteristics and then talk about how they might be used for a better purpose.

14. End corrective encounters on a positive note.

How you part ways makes a huge difference, and it can significantly influence the student’s memory of the entire experience. When you have a tough talk with a student, always end with a positive. You want the student to join up with you, and to do that, you have to make it clear that you see value in who they are and great potential in who they will become.
15. **Use frequent one-on-one meetings to your advantage.**

Entrenched misbehaviors and attitudes will not likely change based on one-time conversations, and it’s silly for us to think they will.

If you are trying to correct habitual misbehavior, consider scheduling a series of short follow-up meetings with the student after the initial talk, and take an interest in helping the student grow. Set weekly goals *together*, and revisit those goals at each successive encounter. Talk about habits and obstacles, and help the student strategize ways to grow.

Taking the time to meet with a challenging student on an ongoing basis is an act of hope, and it may well be the first act of hope they have received in a long time. Give it some thought before each meeting, and share a vision of what you see them becoming with a little work. Don’t hold back or hedge your bets, and paint big. Be their coach, and become someone they don’t want to disappoint.

**Suggested Materials:**


Cedar Creek Productions & Cindy Meehl. (2011). *Buck*. USA: Cedar Creek Productions, LLC.