

How to cope with displacement behavior.

The 'Wounded Minnow' concept

By Richard S. Funk

My first administrative experience was as a high school principal in a small community. I was given specific verbal instructions by school board members concerning what they thought should be accomplished during the first term of my contract. They told me that the teaching staff was weak and that I should initiate a comprehensive staff development and evaluation program. They also pointed out to me that particular teachers were "unsatisfactory" and they wanted me either to improve teacher performance or terminate contracts.

I dutifully began the year implementing a staff development program. It didn't take me very long to see that the "unsatisfactory" personnel were pretty bad, and that they had tenure. It was at this point that I wished someone had told me about the "Wounded Minnow" concept of human behavior. It would have made my life easier.

Some time ago, an ichthyologist, Karl Von Frisch, showed that the skin of cyprinid fishes (minnows) contains an alarm substance (Scheckstoffen). When an injured minnow was introduced into a school of minnows, nothing happened at first, but after about 30 seconds the fish drew together and then suddenly dispersed. By means of apt experiments, Von Frisch was able to show that an alarm substance diffused from the lacerated skin and once perceived through the nasal organs of the other fish, led to a panic reaction. More recent tests with 21 species of European and Asian cyprinid fishes have

revealed that each species reacts to the alarm substance of its own kind. Though the alarm substance is present in the skin of young fish, panic flight is not developed until later in life, after schooling has been established. An attack by a predator, causing injury to a member of a school, leads to appropriate responses.

At this point it might be in order if we developed a working vocabulary and a definition of terms so that Von Frisch's description of the experiment can be studied in detail.

Predator:	The principal
Prey:	The faculty member
Pheromones:	A chemical substance emitted by a wounded minnow. It can also be a verbal or reactionary emission from a wounded faculty member.
Scheckstoffen:	Pheromones
School:	A group of faculty minnows, oops, members.
Wound:	A bad evaluation

Faculty members are known to contain pheromones. When an injured or wounded faculty member is released back into the school, that faculty member gripes and complains. He emits pheromones or Scheckstoffen. The rest of the faculty draw together to hear what the injured faculty member has to say, then they disperse.

Those pheromones were released from the skin of the wounded faculty member and led to a panic reaction by the remainder of the faculty. This panic reaction usually takes the form of, "First him, then maybe they'll be after me." Some veteran principals say faculty can "smell" trouble.

Recent findings of unverified tests¹ have shown that each building of faculty members will react to an alarm substance within each building. Though this alarm substance is present in the skin of young faculty, panic reaction is not developed until later in their careers. The attack by a predator upon the prey, causing injury to a member of the faculty, leads to appropriate responses.

Why does the faculty member behave as he does? Behaviorists refer to this reaction as a form of displacement behavior. Niko Tinbergen describes displacement behavior in the three-spined stickleback, a belligerent, highly territorial fish. The male stickleback digs a nest in the sandy bottom of the shallow waters which he frequents at breeding time. When two male sticklebacks, proprietors of adjoining territories, get into a border uproar and pursue one another back and forth, they wind up facing each other at an invisible wall bubbling rage and frustrated fury. Both will up-end in a vertical position and while goggling at each other in loathing, stand on their heads and dig holes in the sand.

The new principal has to realize that this type of displacement behavior will occur. After all, that new principal is infringing upon that tenured faculty member's school. The faculty member has been there longer than you. The nest corresponds to that tenured faculty's niche, although we haven't found anything that is significant educationally about breeding time. When the principal confronts a faculty member with a bad evaluation, the dispute begins. In the initial stage of a territorial dispute in a building, both persons usually end up in a draw. The latter stage becomes: "It is either him or me." The last thing that the principal should do is to bury his head in the sand.

I have discussed this interesting phenomenon of animal and human behavior with many professional colleagues. One fellow in particular comes to mind quite readily. He told me that he had had a similar experience with faculty behaving like animals, only in his instance the behavior of his faculty was similar to the "mobbing" behavior of certain species of birds. But that is another story.

NOTE

1. A monograph completed in 1445 by Duyvene Dijkgraaf entitled "Untersuchungen ueber Scheckstoffen der Seitenorgane bei Fischen," and thought to explain similarities between human and animal behavior, was found in 1973 in a bombed-out Bavarian church. But inasmuch as this monograph is written entirely in early Celtic pictographs, no one is too certain that it in fact deals with anything.

Review

Youth need critical intelligence

HOW TO BRING UP 2000 TEENAGERS by Ralph Rutenber. Nelson-Hall Inc., Publishers (111 North Canal St., Chicago, Illinois 60606), 1979. 228 pp.

How To Bring Up 2000 Teenagers by Ralph Rutenber is a charming and enlightening source for building-level administrators who are attempting to deal positively with young men and women in a school setting. Essentially, the book is a guide to those concerned with the moral decisions made and actions taken by young adults.

Springing off his experience as a headmaster of an independent school for girls, the New England educator provides his readers with illuminating and practical suggestions for guiding the character development of young people. The book gives many personal examples of how expectations, trust, and affection can help students become giving persons. For adults, who have the "heavy oar" of helping young people make sound moral decisions, this book will make a significant contribution to a greater understanding of the "Janus-like" creature—a teenager.

The book suggests that adult mentors need to listen with a "third ear" to understand what a teenager may be saying in terms of real feelings, motives, and messages. The examination of motives and messages, not openly expressed, can and should be made by attentive adults. The understandings thus derived can help adults to empathize and attend to the nonverbalized needs of teenagers.

The major contribution of the book is embodied in those chapters dealing with the concept of justice in a school community. Dr. Rutenber talks forthrightly about

discipline and punishment. He defines discipline as an ongoing process of recognizing one's obligations to one's communities (home and school) and acting in a manner which promotes the common good. Discipline is teaching, and it should be taught (and learned) in the school. Punishment, on the other hand, is defined not only in terms of a deterrent, but also as a "reenforcement" that acts do have consequences.

To help students confront reality and its demands, Dr. Rutenber suggests the use of the "disciplinary discussion" method, which he terms the most important part of the disciplinary process. The method incorporates eight guides for its use, and according to Dr. Rutenber, the method has produced unusual results. In those cases related to rule infractions by students, the discussion focuses on getting the student to understand and accept the implications of actions in terms of self in relationship to the community.

Punishment, as reenforcement, should follow the disciplinary discussion. It serves as a statement to the community that infractions do have consequences, and to the individual, the punishment serves as a contribution to the restoration of those rules and standards which govern the community. Punishment, according to Dr. Rutenber, always should be given. There should be no exceptions or reduced consequences because of extenuating circumstances.

The final chapters of the book deal with Dr. Rutenber's attempt to destroy the myths that distort the reality (and joy) of working with young people, and the need for a community of affection. The myths about sex, relativism, and imposed beliefs, among others, highlight Dr. Rutenber's position that teenagers need to acquire the tools of critical intelligence. This questioning attitude is necessary to cut through the distortions to "the imprisoned reality that is waiting to be set free." His "community of affection" is grounded in the belief that young people need to exhibit the same qualities expected of adults—affection, concern, and trust—if the community is to be strong and vibrant.

Dr. Rutenber is not a sentimentalist, but an understanding realist. He seemingly is a man of great practical wisdom in the finest Aristotelian sense, and he has made a solid contribution to those who work and live with adolescents in the various communities.

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