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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Using Words to Create a Positive Classroom Culture

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I have been doing an informal study about the way we speak about our classrooms and the way we speak about our students. I was wondering if by changing how we talk, about whom we serve, and who we have faith in, through language, we could change classroom dynamism.

Words, and education for that matter, are used as both a sword and a shield both to inform, oppress, set free, and imprison. I wonder if we were to change the language surrounding our classroom, the energy would follow? I have often made the argument about motivation, that in order for motivation to occur, action must first occur. In the case of motivation and perhaps even classroom dynamics, function follows language.

So today I would like to indulge in a thought experiment: what if we spoke of our classrooms like we would of community, company, tribe, or team?

Teach like a Coach. Coaches of successful teams don't control or manage, they challenge, curate talent and motivate. John Wooden, one of the most famous coaches of all time has been quoted as saying, "If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes." Learn to value classroom mistakes and reframe them as classroom doers (even those pesky disruptions) like Wooden.

Teach like a CEO. Again, CEOs rarely manage or control. The best CEOs motivate, are tasked with finding leaders, and use employee strength for the greater good. Sam Walton, former CEO of Walmart, has said, "High expectations are the key to absolutely everything." Yes, Mr. Walton, I believe you are right, especially when we are talking about the culture of high expectations that we are looking for in a classroom.

Teach like a Tribal Leader. Research into the most effective tribes show that high-level tribes work toward a mission and goal rarely focusing on the behavior of one. Dave Logan, an expert on tribal leadership once said:

"Change the language in the tribe, and you have changed the tribe itself... There's a word in the Bantu languages that [Archbishop Desmond] Tutu has used to help bring the entire country of South Africa together: ubuntu, meaning 'Today I share with you because tomorrow you share with me.'"

The word can also be translated "I am because we are." Can you imagine the classrooms we could create with the mantra "I am because we are"?

One of my favorite quotes is by author Rudyard Kipling when he said, "I am, by calling, a dealer in words; and words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." If Sir Kipling is indeed right and words are the most powerful weapon used by mankind, perhaps we can endeavor to begin with the words we chose in the classroom to create teams, tribes and leaders instead of managing disruption, mitigating damage and controlling our classrooms. Let us speak in the language of high functioning companies or kick-butt teams. The language of a terrific classroom can be where creativity, generosity, and spirit thrive.

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