

# News notes

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Many of us have the challenge of difficult people, some at home and some at work. Below is a "digestion" of a paper presented at the Midwest Symposium for Leadership in February of 2008. This information asks the question: "Who has the problem?"

## Managing Resistance

By JOHN W. MAAG

Managing resistance represents a major task for adults who work with students who display challenging behaviors. Some of these students are at risk for emotional and behavioral problems; others display academic difficulties such as those characteristic of learning disabilities.

Managing resistance continues to be a major problem for teachers and staff. Despite strategies that have been developed for reducing noncompliant or oppositional behaviors and for getting adults to use clear, direct, specific, and contingent commands.

Students who display challenging behaviors are often perceived to be noncompliant, disobedient to directions, uncooperative, and oppositional.

Non-compliance behavior is a "gateway behavior" for students developing serious antisocial behavior. It leads to tantrums, uncooperativeness, aggression, stealing, and delinquency. Effectively dealing with noncompliance can prevent students from developing more serious antisocial behavior.

Compliance typically means obedience to adult directives and prohibitions, cooperation with requests and suggestions, or the willingness to accept suggestions in teaching situations to directives, uncooperativeness with requests and suggestions, and unwillingness to accept suggestions.

Severe oppositional behaviors have become so pervasive that they were classified as a psychiatric disorder of ODD. The symptoms most of the following: violations of minor rules, temper tantrums, argumentativeness, provocative behavior, stubbornness, a pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior, temper outburst, arguing with adults, refusing to follow adult requests, deliberately annoying people, blaming others for own mistakes, touchy or easily annoyed by others, angry and resentful, and spiteful or vindictive.

Noncompliance represents a practical problem for parents, teachers, and for the student as well. Although we don't want robot students who obey any and all commands from any adult, there are expected school home and public behaviors that require compliance.

We focus on modifying student's behavior because they are often seen as the source of the problem. However, let it be noted that "whether or not a student complies with an adult directive has as much to do with how the command is framed and delivered as it does with the consequences, or lack of them, that follow the delivery". There are two kinds of commands, alpha and beta. Alpha commands are given in a clear, direct, and specific manner, with few verbalizations, and they allow a reasonable time for compliance to occur. Beta commands are vague, overly wordy, and often contain multiple instructions to engage in a behavior. The implication is that student noncompliance may be exacerbated by adults' behavior.

Modifying adults' behavior where commands are of the alpha variety makes a difference in the compliance rate of students. However, what is sometimes lost in this discussion is that a plethora of other adult factors can spawn noncompliance in students. Resistance is a more inclusive term than non-compliance because it focuses on the interaction between student's and adult's behaviors. Solutions to the problems of noncompliance or opposition focus solely on changing students' behaviors to the exclusion of also modifying adults' behaviors to obtain a desired outcome. If the goal is to get a task done then the adult should be willing to apply the necessary strategy for success to be more likely. Below are topics that help more students and teachers become more successful.

There are four topics of discussion: (a) the impact of context on behavior, (b) the importance of being comprehensive and unrestricting in behavior, (c) the adaptive function of resistant behavior, and (d) the benefit of joining students in their of reference.

### THE IMPACT OF CONTEXT ON BEHAVIOR

Behavior does not occur in a random or unorganized fashion. People behave purposefully, and their behavior attains meaning as a function of the context-situation or circumstances-that exists in a particular environment (Maag, 1992). For example, social norms (standard rules that state how individuals should behave under given circumstances) and cultural mores (social manifestation of norms) have a profound effect on the expression of behavior and how it is interpreted.

A widely held belief is that alcohol abuse is a major cause of family violence. In cases of spousal violence, both offender and victim have frequently been drinking before the violence. But, studies show that how people react to drinking varies from culture to culture. In some cultures people drink and become violent, whereas in other cultures, people drink and are passive. If societies believe alcohol is a disinhibitor, people become disinhibited. If they believe that it is a depressant, people become depressed. Gelles and Cornell concluded that, because our society believes that alcohol releases violent tendencies, people are given a "time-out" from normal rules of social behavior when they drink or when people believe they are drunk. A second example can be found by examining the socio-cultural context of anorexia nervosa. The relentless pursuit of thinness that is typical of many individuals with anorexia is little more than a caricature of what American society considers beautiful. A study suggested that the increase in anorexia nervosa reflects our cultural preoccupation of thinness in women and our revulsion toward obesity and excessive eating. Most revealing was their comparison of anorexia nervosa and hysteria both predominantly manifested in women across cultures. Hysteria, now considered one of the somatoform disorders, is a condition in which emotional conflict is "converted" into physical symptoms (e.g., blindness, stomach aches, paralysis) as a means of masking an underlying disturbance. Although hysteria is quite rare among women in America, it is still experienced by women in Moslem countries, where feminine sexuality is customarily repressed. By contrast, women in Middle Eastern countries rarely manifest anorexia nervosa.

#### Context as a Determinant of Behavior

The meaning a behavior has for an individual is a function of the context in which that behavior is displayed; lifeguards have more meaning by the side of a pool than on a ski slope; reading has more meaning in a library than it does in a game of soccer. Few behaviors could be universally considered inappropriate or appropriate apart from the context in which they occur. Running and yelling provide obvious examples. Within the context of a math lesson, these behaviors would be considered inappropriate, whereas they would be acceptable, or possibly valued, in the context of playing basketball. Almost all behaviors are appropriate given some context or frame of reference.

Context also provides stimuli that influence whether or not certain behaviors are performed. Some stimuli exert a powerful control over behavior, whereas others have no appreciable effect. For example, the ring of a phone almost always elicits the behaviors of picking up the receiver and saying "hello." On the other hand, receiving a piece of junk mail rarely elicits the behavior of reading it. A student may make animal noises as a way to avoid completing a math assignment or to obtain the attention of certain peers. In either

case, adults are likely to encounter resistance unless the context surrounding the behavior is analyzed and manipulated.

#### Manipulate Context

The word manipulation often has a negative connotation. However, manipulation may not be as negative as it often appears. The very process of teaching is manipulative: Teachers manipulate materials, curricula, and instructional techniques. In fact, every interaction with others can be considered a manipulation because the goal is usually to elicit a response. Adults might as well learn to manipulate effectively, relevantly, and constructively (Maag, 1991).

**Manipulating context can have a profound impact upon reducing resistance.** When the context surrounding a behavior changes the meaning, purpose, and desire to engage in the behavior also change. There are two particularly interesting techniques for manipulating context as a way to manage resistance: **creating ordeals and scrambling a student's pattern or routine.**

#### CREATING ORDEALS

The approach is quite straightforward: The adult imposes an ordeal appropriate to a student's problem that causes equal or greater distress than the problem. The task is something to which the student cannot legitimately object. For example: teacher was confronted with a boy who refused to complete his math assignment and instead wrote the name of his school followed by the word "sucks" on the paper. The teacher nonchalantly said that she was sorry his school "sucked" but that he was not being very creative in his writing of the words. She enthusiastically suggested that the boy turn over the paper and write the word repeatedly in various print styles and sizes. The boy, who began in earnest, quickly lost interest and began working on the math assignment.

There are several important qualities in the ordeal described above. First, the teacher did not present the ordeal as a punitive consequence for misbehaving. Instead, she appeared apologetic that the student did not like the school but also pleased that he had the opportunity to practice writing more creatively. Her reaction automatically changed the context, she was not confrontational and, consequently, she was able to avoid a power struggle. Second, the student performed the ordeal because it was congruent with what he wanted to do, write that his school "sucks". Third, the student changed the context by repeatedly writing that his school "sucks" which, in turn changed the meaning of the behavior. The behavior no longer had the meaning of defying a teacher's instructions, it became a bother to perform. When adults succeed in making a student's tolerance level intolerable, the student will change his or her own behavior. Performing an ordeal is like spitting in someone's soup, he or she can still eat it but won't like it (Rosent 1982).

SCRAMBLING ROUTINE. The performance of a series of behaviors can be conceptualized in terms of a stimulus response chain. A stimulus elicits a response, which in turn becomes a cue to perform another behavior. For example, preparing to take a math quiz may be a cue for a student to feel anxious. Anxiety then becomes a cue for the student to begin crying. Crying, in turn, becomes a cue for the student to run out of the room, and so forth. However, if the stimulus-response chain is broken or "scrambled," the student can no longer perform the behavior as it was performed previously. For example, instructing the student to "feel anxious" 30 minutes prior to taking a math quiz changes the context because the stimulus-response sequence is switched. In this example, the intervention is also paradoxical. If the student brings on anxiety, then he has proof that anxiety is under his control; if he refuses to bring on anxiety, he also has proof that anxiety is under his control because he was able to avoid experiencing it.

#### Be comprehensive and unrestricting

It is easier for adults to manage resistance when they are comprehensive and unrestricting in their thinking. Adults generally have more knowledge of how to deal effectively with students than adults give themselves credit to have. It is amazing how effectively adults could manage resistance if they perceived all their available options. When adults limit their options to certain ways of behaving, ordinary life difficulties become more severe because the initial problem was mishandled and remains unresolved. If a student stays after school for misbehaving, the problem is presumed to have been addressed by the punishment. But what if the student misbehaves again? The linear solution would be to keep the student after school for 2 days, then 3, and so forth. This type of solution is simply "more of the same" and seldom works. In fact, if punishment were effective, it would be used less rather than more often because, by definition, it decreases behavior.

Teachers are often negatively reinforced for using punishment. Negative reinforcement occurs when a behavior is performed to terminate an aversive. For example, some teachers use time-out regularly because it often terminates the perceived aversiveness of a student's misbehavior. The student is also negatively reinforced for misbehaving because being sent to time-out terminates the aversiveness of a boring or difficult lesson. Patterson (1975) coined the term negative reinforcement trap to describe this phenomenon. Other teachers simply continue to use punishment because it has effectively decreased other students' behaviors in the past. From this perspective, it is only a matter of finding the "right" punishment or delivering it at higher intensities. This approach seldom works because students who are considered oppositional or noncompliant have typically been punished numerous

times. However, this mentality points out the tremendous impact that paradigms have on adults' ability to perceive different options and behaviors.

#### The Power of Paradigms

A major reason adults have difficulty managing resistance is because they are constrained by their paradigms. People are constantly viewing the world through their paradigms--selecting from the environment those data that best fit their rules and regulations, while trying to ignore the rest. As a result; what may be perfectly obvious to a person adhering to one paradigm maybe totally imperceptible to a person with a different paradigm. Scientists experienced one of three reactions when encountering data that did not match the expectations created by their paradigm. In some cases, they simply ignored the unexpected data. Other times they distorted the data until they fit their paradigm, rather than acknowledging them as an exception to the rules. In extreme cases, they were physiologically incapable of perceiving the unexpected data for all intents and purposes, the data were invisible. That happens to teachers, students and administrators at times.

One of the most conspicuous examples of how paradigms have blinded people to new ways of doing things has been the change in watch manufacturing over the past 3 decades (Barker, 1992). In 1968, the Swiss dominated the world of watch making, with a 65% world market share and more than 80% of the profits. By 10 years later, their market share had plummeted to below 10%, and in the ensuing 3 years they had to release 50,000 of their 65,000 watch workers. Today, Japan dominates the world in watch making, even though they had virtually no market share 30 years ago. How could the Swiss, who commanded the watch making industry for the greater part of the 20th century and were known for the excellence of their products. They were blinded by their paradigm. They failed to recognize the importance of the quartz movement watch that the Swiss themselves invented in their research laboratories. In the eyes of the Swiss manufacturers, the quartz movement watch could not possibly represent the future of watch making because it did not have bearings, gears, or a mainspring. So confident were the Swiss in their conclusion that they did not even protect the idea when they displayed the watch at the annual watch congress later that year. Seiko of Japan and Texas Instruments of the United States walked past and took one look, and the rest is history.

Education is changing and we must take a look at our paradigms.

#### Paradigm Paralysis and Resistance

The story of the Swiss watch manufacturers illustrates a particularly deleterious effect known as paradigm paralysis. Paradigm paralysis prevents adults from

abandoning their preconceived notions about what things “should” do or say to a student and expanding their perspective to consider alternative options. Adults are often constrained by the dominant paradigm stating that resistance originates from a student and that to reduce resistance a student must behave differently. **Information about changing resistance that does not conform to this basis has a difficult time being acknowledged and used.** The cure for paradigm paralysis is for adults to be comprehensive and unrestricting in their behavior. In this way, they are more likely to access knowledge and skills in their repertoire that are not typically perceived as options for managing student’s behavior.

### Overcoming Limitations

Many potential interventions are available if adults would only shed their dominant paradigms and access other areas of experience. **The major limitation to overcome is viewing resistance as consisting of behaviors inherent in a student.** Instead, it is advantageous to view resistance as originating solely from adults’ behavior. This statement typically is met with much resistance from adults, thereby proving the point, the message originating from the sender fed resistance to the assertion. Adults have very little control over the actual behaviors students. For example, some students will engage in highly destructive and aggressive behaviors in school because they realize the only consequence is being suspended or expelled, which, from their perspective, is a desirable reinforcer. On the other hand, adults have complete control over their own behavior and ability to modify it continuously until a desired response is elicited from a student.

Paradigm paralysis remains a difficult condition to shed. For example, a teacher may tell a boy to stop pulling a girl’s hair. As a result of this direction, the boy stops pulling her hair but begins tweaking her ear. Many teachers would probably lament the boy’s oppositional nature. However, what they may fail to understand is that their behavior- giving a direction- resulted in a change in the boy’s behavior. Eliciting this type of change in a student’s behavior is rarely looked upon positively by adults because a different; and similarly inappropriate, behavior was performed. Nevertheless, getting any change in a student’s behavior is a positive beginning. Behavior change is like a kaleidoscope: Even if the tube is turned only a fraction of an inch, the entire pattern changes.

### ADAPTIVE FUNCTION OF RESISTANCE

All behaviors both those society deems to be acceptable and those it deem unacceptable are purposeful and serve a function for a student. Neel and Cessna (1993) used the term behavior intent to describe the relation between the behavior a student exhibited and the outcome he or she desired. When a student acts, even with behaviors considered to be inappropriate, he

or she does so to achieve a result. The desired result, or outcome, can be viewed as the intent or function of the behavior. In turn, the intent of the behavior will have an impact on the form the behavior takes to achieve the outcome. It is entirely possible for the function that a behavior serves to be appropriate while the form a behavior takes is inappropriate. For example, a student who performs what initially appears to be random acts of classroom aggression may, in fact, be seeking to associate with peers’. Although the form of the behavior (aggression) may be inappropriate, the purpose or intent of the behavior (affiliation) is an acceptable and desirable social goal.

This discussion points to the importance of conducting a functional assessment—the process of determining the intent an inappropriate behavior serves for obtaining a desired outcome and replacing that behavior with a more appropriate one that accomplishes the same goal. Interventions that focus only on the form or topography of a behavior and fail to address the purpose of the behavior will often be ineffective: As long as the behavior has a powerful purpose related to it, a student will continue to use it and continue to be resistant.

### Conceptualizations of Resistance

Like all behaviors, those characteristic of resistance serve an adaptive function. Freud (1900/1952) speculated that the adaptive functions of resistance were to maintain internal psychological equilibrium and avoid consciously experiencing emotional conflict. He reached this conclusion after observing that many of his patients **failed to participate in therapy despite their request for help.** Freud believed that by complying with the therapist, the patient would be exposing herself/himself to the anxiety associated with the problem that initially prompted the need for help. However, by being resistant to therapy, the patient could keep the anxiety at an unconscious level which, in the short term, would be less emotionally painful than confronting it directly. From another perspective, individuals cling to the way things are rather than exposing themselves to the uncertainty and threat the risk of changing their behavior implies. In essence, individuals try to maintain homeostasis, a term family systems experts use to describe a person’s desire for consistency in life. Consistency breeds predictability; which, in turn, reduces anxiety by engendering feelings of comfort and a sense of self-assurance. There is an adage among psychotherapists that is germane to the concept of homeostasis: **Clients do not enter therapy to get rid of their neuroses but to perfect them.** Although resistant behaviors serve to shelter individuals from the pain associated with the risk of behaving differently, **they unfortunately keep students and adults responding in predictable and often ineffective ways.**

### Reframing: Addressing Intent Through Context

Functional assessment is important. However, two issues may influence its effectiveness for managing resistance. First, some students may crave too much of a particular outcome. For example, it would be impossible to generate a replacement behavior for a student who wants 3 hours of attention daily from a teacher. Second, it may not be possible to find a replacement behavior that is as acceptable to a student as the inappropriate behavior. For example, it may be difficult to find a replacement behavior as effective as aggression for a student who seeks to escape from an aversive situation. The use of reframing represents a potential way to circumvent these problems.

There are two types of reframing: context reframing and meaning reframing. Context reframing is based on the assumption that every behavior is useful in some, but not all, contexts or situations. In the previous example, a context reframe for aggression would address this question: In what situations or with what people, is it useful or even helpful to be aggressive? Once a student realizes that there are some situations in which aggression is appropriate (e.g., self defense) but others in which it results in unwanted consequences (e.g., losing a highly reinforcing activity), he or she may be more likely to accept a replacement behavior to use in the target setting or context-meaning reframing focuses on providing a student with an alternative positive, yet acceptable, meaning for an inappropriate behavior. For example, "stubbornness" might be reframed as "independence," or "greediness" might be reframed as "being able to meet your needs."

Recall that once the meaning changes, the purpose and desire to engage in a behavior also changes.

### JOIN STUDENTS IN THEIR FRAME OF REFERENCE

Too often adults attempt to inculcate students with ways of looking at and dealing with the world that have worked well for them, but that may be clumsy and inappropriate from a student's point of view. Adults expect students to accept authority. Trying to lecture or otherwise force a student to comply with an adult version of the world may result in resistance. No two people are alike, and no two people understand the same sentence the same way. Erickson believed that individuals bring with them a model of the world that is as unique as their thumbprints. Therefore, to manage resistance effectively, adults must try not to fit students to an adult concept of what they should be, instead, adults must learn to join students in their frames of reference.

Joining a student's frame of reference is accomplished when rapport is established. Rapport typically happens when adults focus on providing students with genuine, unconditional positive regard, empathy, and honesty as a way to promote self-acceptance and self responsibility. However, rapport is not synonymous with being sympathetic or with being liked by the student although sympathy and pleasant interactions

are often erroneously taken as evidence or rapport. Instead it is the ability to symmetrically respond to another person's model of the world. It is not easy to determine how students construct meaning from the world. They have their own unique experiences and have organized those experiences into an equally unique set of judgments about the nature of the world and a set of rules by which to believe relative to the context in which that view is operating. Because student models of the world are constructed internally, with the assistance of various cognitive processes and structures, they are not accessible to direct observation. Therefore, one way to join students' frames of reference is instructing them to do what they are already doing and then interjecting some difference. Telling students to do what they are already doing but in a slightly different way creates instant rapport and also changes the context surrounding the behavior. Embedding instructions and paradoxical directives are two ways of accomplishing this goal.

### Embedding Instructions

Embedding instructions is a variation of behavioral momentum. Behavioral momentum works by instructing a student to engage in two or three behaviors the adult knows the student wants to perform naturally, making high probability requests. Once a student is performing the desired behavior, the adult makes the low-probability request. For example, a teacher may follow a request to have a student tack pictures on a bulletin board (desired behavior) with an instruction to throw away trash (undesired behavior). The idea behind this approach is to build momentum toward compliance by first getting a student to perform a series of desired behaviors. In the tough kids materials it is as simple as having the student say, "Sure I will" when given an instruction.

Embedding instructions differs from behavioral momentum in that instead of instructing a student to engage in a high-probability behavior, one directs a student to do what he or she is already doing while interspersing the request for the desired behavior. For example, a teacher may embed the following instruction: "Mary, as you shuffle your papers just open your math book to page 18 while talking to Susie." In this situation, Mary is engaging in two undesirable behaviors: shuffling her papers and talking to Susie. This instruction embeds three separate tasks-two of which Mary is already performing. The part of the instruction with which her teacher is trying to get compliance is opening the math book to page 18. If the instructions were separated, Mary could easily refuse one or all of them. But are refusal when the tasks are combined into a single instruction means what? That Mary will not shuffle her papers? That she will not open her book? That she will not talk to Susie? The very extent of the effort needed to identify what one is refusing in itself is a deterrent to refusal. Nor can a

refusal of the entire instruction be offered comfortably. To the single tasks she can easily say "NO." But to the combined task, she cannot say, "no" because if she is shuffling her papers, she must immediately open her book and talk to Susie. Hence, Mary may prefer to perform the combined tasks unwillingly rather than to put forth the effort to analyze the instructions. This reasoning is specious, but it is the emotional reasoning that is common in daily life, and is not an exercise in logic.

### Paradoxical Directives

Paradoxical directives seem to defy logic. They convey to a student that he or she can change by remaining unchanged. The idea behind working paradoxically is to never fight with students. When adults accept a student's resistance, the student is caught in a position where resistance becomes cooperation. Paradoxical directives can focus on either encouraging a student to produce the maladaptive behavior at will (compliance based) or avoiding trying to behave appropriately defiance based; (Simon & Vetter-Zemitzsbt 1985).

Compliance-based paradoxes communicate the message that in order to reduce an inappropriate behavior, the student should keep it. The idea is to make an uncontrollable behavior occur voluntarily. Because the behavior will occur anyway, a student will be in a better position to predict its occurrence. Therefore, the process that perpetuates the problem behavior is interrupted a student cannot continue usual ways of trying to prevent the behavior. The student who was instructed to bring on anxiety 15 minutes prior to taking a math quiz is an example of a compliance-based paradox. It also made use of scheduling, having a student express a behavior in different locations, durations, or times before it spontaneously occurs. For example, two students that argue may be instructed to "argue" for 5 minutes at various times throughout the day. If the students adhere to the request, they are being compliant. If they refuse to follow the direction, they are also being compliant; by not arguing, the desired outcome is attained.

Defiance-based paradoxes convey to a student that in order to change, the student should stay the same or give up. The idea is to have a student oppose carrying out the directive in circumstances in which by so doing the student is being compliant. There are several ways in which adults can deliver defiance-based paradoxes. First, students can be instructed to delay changing their behavior by having them move more slowly than they expect. For example, an adult should say; "Today, It is important not to anything to improve your behavior." Second, adults can forbid students from changing their behaviors. For example, an adult could say, "In order to find out how bad your behavior is, just give in to it and let it happen," or, "I don't want you to be polite today." A third variation that is more extreme is to declare hopelessness—that is, predicting that

change is impossible. For example, an adult could say, "I think it is really impossible for you to finish your homework." All these variations focus on joining students' frames of reference by instructing them to do what they are already doing. Although these approaches can be very effective, they should be avoided with students who engage in behaviors that are dangerous to themselves or others.

### Conclusion

There is a simple axiom for managing resistance: If what adults are doing is not working, they should try something else-almost anything else. However, there are several reasons why this axiom is difficult to practice. First, humans are creatures of habit. Through repetition, behaviors become automatic. When adults are under stress, they tend to access the most habitual behaviors in their repertoire. Those behaviors frequently are ones that constrict options for managing resistance and lead to paradigm paralysis. Second, adults often personalize student's behavior. When this occurs, adults may overreact emotionally and engage in resistance-engendering behaviors. Third, responding differently is risky, not only for students but also for adults. Adults run the risk that using reframing, embedding instructions, paradoxical directives, or any other peculiar idea will not work. The fear of failure keeps many adults in typical and unimaginative pattern is in terms of how they respond to students. In order to conquer the fear of taking a risk, it is helpful to understand that trying and failing is not failing-it is assessment. Failure often occurs when adults do not try something different.

One thing that all students teach adults is that there are different ways of looking at situations. Managing resistance should not be a massive job. Adults usually know what to do, but do not always know that they know it. The key is for adults to be flexible and creative and not restrict themselves to set patterns of behaving. In that way, adults will be more likely to tap into, and make available, the resources they possess. The introduction of variety and richness into students' lives by understanding and using context, being comprehensive and unrestricting in behavior, determining the purpose resistance serves, and joining students in their frames of reference will help break up rigid patterns of responding, which is necessary for managing resistance effectively.

Happy March! If you would like to talk more about managing resistance let me know. I have a list of references about this subject.

Teacher of the month is Thelma Ivy. Thelma is new here this year and is doing a good job at Coffeyville High School.