Discipline That Restores invites willing participants to use cooperative resolution process

by Ron Claassen

Discipline that Restores is an emerging discipline system for schools that parallels the emerging Restorative Justice System. Roxanne, my wife, is an eighth grade teacher. Her classroom and her school are implementing Discipline that Restores. The results of her experience were written in our January Newsletter and because of the response to that article, I am in the midst of elaborating on a series of nine principles written first in 1993 to guide Discipline that Restores.

Principle #1 reminds us that the rule violation points to the real concern, the person who was violated. Principle #2 reminds us of the need to identify the person most impacted (victim) and not leave them out of the response (Match Newsletter). Principle #3 identifies the goal of “making things as right as possible.” Principle #4 reminds us that there is danger and opportunity in the response to each violation and each misbehavior can be transformed into a teaching/learning situation (April Newsletter). Principle #5 focuses on using cooperation as much as possible and coercion as little as possible. Principle #6 says the conflict is best resolved directly between the ones in the conflict (May Newsletter). Past newsletters are available at www.vorp.org or 559-291-1120.

Principle #7. DTR recognizes that not all persons misbehaving will choose to be cooperative. Therefore there is a need for outside authority to make decisions for the misbehaving person who is not willing to be cooperative. The consequences imposed should be tested by whether they are reasonable, related, restorative, and respectful.

An interesting part of using a cooperative approach to solve a problem is that by definition, you cannot force it. To use a cooperative approach you must invite the other party and wait for them to decide if they choose to cooperate, the chances are very high that you can work out a mutually satisfactory resolution. A difficult thing for a teacher is to wait for the student to make up their mind. A vice principal recently told me that the first time he tried using this approach, it seemed like he waited for ever. He said, “I was ready with at least three lectures. I’m comfortable with lectures but I found it very difficult to wait. Finally he said ‘yes.’ Actually, it probably wasn’t even a minute.”

The delay may be because they need time to consider this new approach. It may be that they need some information to make the decision. It may be that they need some support, some encouragement and accountability. Perhaps, it is more likely that they will say yes to cooperation if they have assurance of a fair process or of enough support to make sure it is fair.

There is an immediate safety situation that needs some authority to take appropriate action to restore safety. It is worth taking the time needed to explore options that might help the person change their mind and decide to try a cooperative approach. So a good question to ask is, why not? Students sometimes tell Roxanne when she asks why not, “If you punish me, I don’t have to keep making and keeping these agreements.” With a bit more discussion, they usually decide they want to participate in the decision.

If a decision is not to cooperate, that means it leaves outside authority (#2) and coercion (#1) as the only options. Coercion actually means that the adult makes a decision or the student is allowed to make the decision (permissiveness is coercion with the student in charge). Whatever is decided, I believe it should meet some criteria to guide how the authority or coercion is used. Jane Nelson in POSITIVE DISCIPLINE suggests that an imposed decision should be respectable, reasonable, and related. I would add it must also be restorative and respectful.
DTR prefers cooperation to coercion

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intended to also reintegrate. If our pun-
ishments or logical consequences or 
whatever we choose to call them meet 
these five criteria, they will elicit a dif-
ferent response than if they don’t. I believe 
that the difference will be observable in 
both the one administering and the one 
receiving. I think that authority and co-
ercion used in ways that don’t meet 
these criteria are on the abuse side of 
the continuum.

So DTR is not suggesting that there is 
no authority or coercion, just that you 
prefer to not have to use it. And, when 
you do use it, it should be administered 
with a commitment to be constructive, 
even if the other is not yet constructive, 
and in ways that are reasonable, re-
spectful, related, restorative, and 
(re)integrative.

Principle #8. DTR prefers that persons 
who misbehave and are not yet coop-
erative be continually invited (not co-
erced) and encouraged to become re-
sponsible and cooperative, and they 
should be given that opportunity at the 
easiest possible time they so choose.

If what we do to a student, because 
of their misbehavior, stigmatizes and os-
tracizes them we have created a greater 
problem for them and for us. Remem-
ber that each misbehavior is a teaching/
learning opportunity. If we miss that op-
portunity and instead of helping them 
learn to successfully participate and find 
their needs, they will meet them in some other way. 
Everyone needs a reasonable sense of 
power over their lives, to be cared for, 
and to feel like they belong. Our disci-
pline process should help them learn 
how to do that in ways that are socially 
acceptable. If they think someone is 
picking on them, how do they appropri-
ately address that problem? If the rule 
seems unfair, how do they appropriately 
work to change the rule?

We cannot afford to give up. If we 
always put a student out of the class or 
out of the school, we have not helped 
them learn. An unintended conse-
quence of a discipline system that stig-
matizes and ostracizes students is that we 
are preparing them to be good mem-
bers of fringe groups and gangs.

Instead, we must let them know that 
we care and continually invite them to 
join in the process of figuring out how to 
solve this particular problem and in the 
long run to join in making the world a 
better place for everyone.

Volunteer mediators needed!

VORP mediators learn and practice peacemaking skills they can use in the 
home, workplace, and congregation.

The next training is scheduled on 
June 25 & 26. For participants who 
agree to take three cases, the cost of 
the training is only $20; for others, the 

cost is $100. 

Call VORP at 291-1120 for details.