The Edge: Business Lessons From First and Second Graders

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For more than a decade, I've taught first and second grade Sunday school. It's educational — for me perhaps more than for the kids, and here are some of the lessons I try to incorporate into my work life.

• If you're listening … If you've ever been in charge of more than three kids at once, you've probably used this trick. Speaking very softly, say, "If you're listening, put your hands in the air (or stand on one foot, or touch your nose)." It's magic. One minute all the kids are talking, and then one by one, they stop talking and mimic your actions, and the room becomes completely silent.

I've often wondered if the same approach would work in business meetings when people are interrupting each other, each one talking louder to be heard above the person she's interrupting. I doubt if, "Raise your hands if you're listening" would be effective, but perhaps speaking quietly would cause others to stop and listen.
• Great job! I love to encourage a child by catching them doing something good and telling them about it – and it doesn't have to be a big thing. "John, what beautiful colors you're using!" "Way to go, Mary! You remembered the names of the people from our story!"

What would happen at work if managers focused on catching employees doing something well and told them about it?

• The sky doesn't have to be blue. When one child won't share the blue crayon and everybody wants to color the sky, you have a teachable moment: share by taking turns. While one person colors blue sky, somebody else colors green grass and another person colors a yellow sun. Even better, a creative child can use orange and pink and purple to color the sky and call it sunrise or sunset.

How often in business do we get single-focused and think we have to color the sky blue (and only blue) before we can do anything else? Sharing resources and thinking creatively can significantly improve many of our projects at work.

• Don't rely only on your eyes. I've found that kids learn best when the lesson involves more than one of their senses. For example, I can tell my class that being blind means you can't see. Or I can have kids close their eyes and try to identify objects using touch, sound, smell, and even taste. One week, instead of simply reading about Jesus calming the sea, we built a cardboard boat big enough to fit all of us, and we all loaded into it to "ride out the storm," which we created using a squirt bottle of water for rain, a fan to create wind, and the light turning on and off for our lightning.

How often do we expect others (and ourselves) to learn new concepts and techniques using only one of our senses? Perhaps instead of telling people to "read the instructions," we should create methods of training that involve additional senses – and little fun and a squirt bottle might help, too.

I don't know about your office, but I like being part of a team of people who listen, applaud hard work, share, and think outside the box. Thanks, first and second graders.

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