

A review of “What A great teacher Do Differently” by Todd Whitaker

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### **Abstract**

This is a review of the book “What A great teacher Do Differently” by Todd Whitaker. I will begin the paper by providing information about the author and then move into summarizing the book. In the book, Todd Whitaker provided fourteen characteristics that make up a great teacher. These characteristics are:

1. It's people, not programs.
2. The power of expectations.
3. Prevention versus revenge.
4. High expectations and for whom.
5. Who is the variable?
6. Ten days out of ten.
7. The teacher is the filter.
8. Don't need to repair and always do repair.
9. Ability to ignore.
10. Random or plandom?
11. Base every decision on the best people.
12. In every situation, ask who is most comfortable and who is least comfortable.
13. Standardized tests.
14. Make it cool to care.

I will explain each one of these topics and characteristics of a great teacher according to Whitaker.

This review is over the book “What A great teacher Do Differently” by Todd Whitaker. Todd Whitaker is a Professor at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana. Prior to going to Indiana in 1993, he taught mathematics and business at the junior high and high schools levels in Missouri. He then served as a middle school and high school principal for eight years.

Whitaker discussed fourteen different strategies or practices that are performed by a great teacher and could be used in any classroom. The first concept that he discussed was “It’s people, not programs.” In this concept, Whitaker discussed that it’s not the programs in a school that make it a great school, but rather the teachers and people that are in school. These people are the people that put in the extra time, are willing to take on the hard challenges, and produce tremendous learning environments. He provided an example of some of these great people in a growing school. There was a school that was growing in student population and there were not enough classrooms, so the principal asked the teachers who would want to take on the challenge of having class in the gym for the year. There was one teacher who volunteered and she used the idea of an open classroom. According to Whitaker, she produced a learning environment where the students were engaged and she did not have many discipline problems even though the class was in a loud, open area in the school building.

In order to have a great learning environment, a teacher needs to have good discipline. The teacher has a way of preventing the behavior before it takes place. The teacher has the ability to focus on the students instead of focusing on the programs in school. Sometimes I focus so much on the explanations of each topic, I forget that I need to focus on the individual student instead of the math that I have to cover. If I can focus on the student more, than I would be able to better connect the student to the material. .

The second concept that Whitaker discussed was the power of expectations. The teacher has a way of communicating the expectations to the students, realizes that each student have individual needs, and has the ability to hold these expectations consistently throughout the entire year. The teacher sets the expectations and then establish relationships so the students what to meet these expectations. Teacher need to look at the start of each new year as an opportunity to reestablish expectations and introduce change. As the year progresses, it is easy to not be as motivated to hold oneself and the students up to the high expectations. A great teacher holds that enthusiasm throughout the entire year. I know that I have struggled with staying consistent with my expectations in my classroom. I send mixed messages to my students when I am not consistent with all students.

Along with the idea of having high expectations, the topic of prevention versus revenge becomes the next topic of discussion. When a student misbehaves, the great teacher has one goal and that is to keep it from happening again. Students misbehave, and even a great teacher might have to send them to the office or have a student leave the room for a short period of time. An effective teacher wants students to be better when they leave. This means that when students leave the room, they need to understand why they are leaving and the teacher needs to help the student to calm down before that student is to leave the room. But the goal is to prevent the behavior that would cause the student to go to the office. How a student interprets what goes on in a classroom might be completely different than how the teacher interprets the same situation. This is a mistake that I make when I teach. I send the student to the office and sometimes that student doesn't even know why. This makes it difficult for the student to understand the expectations in the room when I don't communicate to them what they did wrong.

According to Whitaker, all teachers have the same options when responding to misbehavior. Teachers could send the kids to the office, set them in the hall, yell at them, punish the whole class, punish just the individual student, and many other options. It is the great teacher that pulls out the more effective strategies and doesn't have to pull out the options as many times as ineffective teachers. So, why do students behave in one classroom and not the other? One reason is simply respect. A great teacher shows respect to the students, their parents, and them self. Whitaker gave an example of 25 students in a room. Student #25 wanted to challenge the teacher and chose to misbehave. All the other students wanted the teacher to handle the situation in a professional manner and show respect to student #25. If the teacher would not show respect and handle the situation in a professional manner, then the teacher might loose the respect of more students and then instead of having one student that wants to misbehave, there are four, five, or more students that choose to follow student #25. Once a teacher loses the respect from students, it is hard to regain it. I know that in my second year of teaching I ran into this problem. I had one student that chose to misbehave quite frequently. I tried handling his behavior in many different ways, but not one of them was in a manner of respect. Each time I tried to handle a situation, I tried present myself as the authority figure instead of respecting him enough to communicate the expectations and methods that could be used to diminish the behavior. By the end of the year, I figured out that I was not consistent enough with my expectations and before I knew it, I had three more students that consistently caused problems in class. By not being consistent, I lost the respect of these students. Teaching is definitely a learning experience.

This brings me to the fourth topic of conversation, high expectations and for whom? All teachers have high expectations of their students. According to Whitaker, a great teacher not only has high expectations for their students, but also himself. A great teacher doesn't put the

blame on the students, the parents, other teachers, or any other excuse that might cause the students to behave or know the things the teacher expects. Instead, a great teacher realizes that these are students and sometimes things don't go as planned, but this teacher holds himself to high expectations to do the best he can and improve his performance as a teacher.

So, then the next question is who is the variable in the classroom? The key variable in the classroom is the teacher. If students do poorly on the test, we need to ask the question of who taught them the material. Who controls the classroom environment? Whose behavior can a teacher actually control in the classroom? A great teacher takes responsibility for how the students do, continue to work on the classroom environment, and realize that the only person that the teacher can control is himself. Also, a great teacher knows how to deal with the demands of others, whether these demands come from inside the school or outside the school. These teachers don't lose sight of what they are doing.

This will bring us to the next topic labeled "ten days out of ten." An effective teacher creates a positive atmosphere in their classrooms and schools. But, many things can bring teachers down: an upset parent, a troubled student, limited resources. This is part of the job. As an educator, it is my role to take a positive approach ten days out of ten. An effective teacher treats everyone with respect, every day. It can be a challenge at times to this when the students or others don't show respect back. Showing respect does not mean that a teacher has to like each and every student. This means that an effective teacher treats his students with positive regard.

Showing students positive regard can be difficult at times, but one way to show it is through praise. Praise makes students feel good and if students feel good about themselves, then they want to do well because they hold high regard for the teacher. There are five things that help praise work. To be effective, praise must be authentic, specific, immediate, clean, and

private. Authentic means that we are praising people for something genuine, recognizing them for something that is true. Effective praise is specific. Students remember what they are being praised for. Immediate praise is recognizing positive efforts and contributions in a timely manner. Also, praise must be clean. Praise is clean if a teacher if the praise give to the student is authentic, not for something that the teacher wants the student to do tomorrow. The other part of praise is being clean. This means that it cannot include the word “but.” If the praise includes the word but, then the student focuses on the part after the word but. They don’t think that the statement is praise. Instead the student may take the statement as criticism. The last thing that makes praise effective is that it needs to be private. Teachers need to give praise to students individually. This helps make the student feel like the teacher cares about them as an individual. This is an important element of teaching. Students need to know that the teacher cares about them. I know that I struggle with knowing when to give praise and knowing if it is too much praise.

This brings us to the seventh element of being a great teacher. The teacher is the filter for the day-to-day reality of school. A teacher’s behavior sets the tone. It is important to be positive, ask the student “How is your day going?” If a teacher sets the tone that he wants to be at school and enjoys being there, then it makes for a more positive environment. The tone that the teacher sets goes outside of the classroom also. How a teacher talks to colleagues also sets the tone in the school. If a teacher had a meeting with an angry parent or had to deal with disciplinary action with a student, that teacher does not need to go to the teacher lounge and start complaining about that parent or student. A great teacher doesn’t speak badly of parents or students because what they say can affect the environment of the school. Along with having a positive attitude, a great teacher is also a great goal setters. If a teacher has the goal to be more

excited about teaching tomorrow than today, than that will set the tone for the students. Just maybe the students will walk into the room and be more excited about learning tomorrow than they are today. The body language that a teacher portrays can go a long way.

A great teacher realizes that sometimes students bring issues from the outside environment and it is up to the teacher to make the environment inside the classroom a positive one. It is up to the teacher to not have excuses and when the challenging group comes along, not to say, "This is the worst group of kids ever." The kids can sense that and after awhile might try to live up to the reputation. Perception can become reality. In my first year of teaching I struggled with letting what the students brought into the classroom affect my teaching. I struggled with keeping my classroom environment free from those issues.

Since the teacher has control over the environment, then that leads to the eighth characteristic of a great teacher. A great teacher doesn't need to repair, they always do. The best teacher seldom is engaged in the behaviors that cause harm to students. He doesn't run students down or embarrass them in front of their peers. The best teacher consistently complements and praises students. These teachers seldom need to do any emotional repairing in their classrooms; they are continually working to repair, just in case. This teacher tries to prevent the poor behavior before it happens.

Even a great teacher has bad days and has things that break him down. Sometimes a teacher may feel like he is short with the students and doesn't have the patience as normal. When that happens, a great teacher is not afraid to apologize and be honest with the students. Students respond to honesty and if a teacher wants to teach the students to learn how to apologize and be honest, then that behavior needs to be modeled. This is something that I started to do in my classroom. Since I started to apologize when I made a mistake, the students have

become slightly more honest with me. Also, a great teacher knows how to deal with angry parents. If an angry parent is talking to the teacher, that parent is ready for a fight. The teacher knows not to get into a fight with a parent because it just gives that parent more power. The best thing to say to that parent is “I am sorry that happened.” A great teacher is sorry that happened, but by doing that, it makes the parent uncomfortable and unable to continue to argue. A great teacher can think on the spot and repair something before it is even an issue.

The ninth characteristic of a great teacher is the ability to ignore. A teacher needs to be aware of almost everything that happens in their classrooms. An effective teachers knows how easily one or two students can disrupt the flow of learning. This teacher knows when to go with the flow, when to take a stand, and how to eliminate minor disturbances without further distracting others. This is part of keeping a positive environment. The great teacher has the ability to ignore trivial disturbances and the ability to respond to inappropriate behavior without escalating the situation.

The tenth skill of a great teacher is that in their classrooms, very little happens at random. A great teacher has a plan and purpose for everything they do. If things don't work out the way he had envisioned, he reflects on what he could have done differently and adjusts his plans accordingly. He is organized and doesn't leave things to chance. If things don't go his way, his classroom does not seem out of control.

A great teacher not only knows how to plan, but also knows how to base every decision on the best people. The teachers makes a decision on the following three basic questions. The first question is “What is the purpose?” Why do teachers do what they do? The second question is “Will this actually accomplish the purpose?” The third question is “What will the best people think?” A great teacher plans and makes decisions based on the best people. If a teacher wants

to have high expectations in the classroom, then that teacher needs to make decisions based on the best students instead of on the worst students. A teacher needs to keep all students in mind, but this means to hold the best students to high expectations also. If teachers would teach to the middle, they would sell the best students short. Great teacher find a way to keep every student moving forward.

The twelfth characteristic is that a great teacher has the ability to be able to ask who is the most comfortable and who is the least comfortable. The ability to ask this question is important because it helps teachers to balance the rules and guidelines with those times when we need to make exceptions. These teachers understand that if people are uncomfortable, they change. Making a student feel uncomfortable is not the goal. The goal is to treat each student as if they were good and have them feel comfortable. The teacher realizes that yelling at a student that misbehaves or the whole class only makes the students that were behaving uncomfortable. The students that usually misbehave are used to being yelled at so they are not uncomfortable. So, the a great teacher understand how to make these students feel uncomfortable enough to change the behavior without diminishing whom they are and not making the other students feel uncomfortable. In my second year of teaching, I made the mistake of punishing the entire class for something that only a few individuals did. I made the students that didn't do anything feel really uncomfortable and disrespected. I learned quickly that when trying to diminish a behavior, it has to be specific to the student.

The thirteenth topic that Whitaker discussed is standardized tests. Standardized tests are a hot topic today. Whitaker stated that the best teacher has the ability to adjust for these tests and use them as a guideline, not as something that runs his classroom. A great teacher keeps testing

in perspective and realizes that the material on standardized tests is only a small portion of what students learn in school.

The last characteristic of a great teacher is that he makes it “cool to care.” If students know that the teacher cares about them, then those students want to work for that teacher. The students have respect for the teacher even if the material that the teacher is teaching is hard for them. These students will behave, work hard, and do the best they can. That is all a teacher can ask from the students.

These skills are definite skills that I need to work on as a teacher. I struggle with consistency and communication in the classroom. When I am not consistent with my expectations and follow through with them, then it sends mixed messages to the students. Also, I need to remember to communicate in a positive manner with the students. If I don't communicate in a positive way, then I shouldn't expect the students to communicate positively with me. I want to provide that positive environment where the students are motivated and feel respect. I hope to take these qualities that I learned in the book back and apply it to my classroom.

Reference

Whitaker, Todd. (2004). What A great teacher Do Differently. Larchmond, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.