



It's Not What You Say – It's How You Say It

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCES OF A FIRST YEAR TEACHER.

I saw a movie a few years ago, during my time at university. I cannot recall the class, but the movie was *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, starring James Stewart. It is the story of a man appointed to fill a vacancy within the United States Senate who arrives in Washington unprepared for the corruption he faces. You see, Mr. Smith is a good guy. He is a guy who likes to help others. He is also a guy who, when faced with the pressures of the many demands of politics, finds a way to reconcile and overcome these pressures.

My father was also a politician, through and through. As a child, I remember parish dinners, afternoon teas at retirement homes, public appearances at events, and meeting a lot of people from different walks of life. I was always in awe of my dad – how he dealt with all of those competing pressures, all at once, and how he managed to serve his public day after day. These were mind-boggling feats to me!

As a young adult, I became more aware of one simple fact: my father wasn't just serving one homogeneous public. He was serving several. From the constituents of the riding to the big bosses in Ottawa, his job was one of reconciliation and negotiation, of bringing the competing priorities of all his different publics together.

Right, and not to mention a lot of P.R.

Although we choose different careers, I've come to realize that our occupations have a lot in common. Let's face it. Teachers are politicians. We deal with many different people who represent many different publics. We shake hands, we make polite chit-chat, and we have our supporters and our nay-sayers.

Like my father, we don't serve just one public, we serve many. From the school board level, to professional organizations, to administration, to parents and to students, we are constantly reconciling and negotiating between many different publics. It is dizzying, it is scary, and at times, it is just downright hard.

This reality was never clearer to me than my first report card season, when I learned a very important lesson: it's not always what you say, it's how you say it. My first report cards were no sprint; they were a marathon, and they made me aware of just how many people I had to please.

I figured that parents would want to hear it straight. I felt as though if I told them, frankly and honestly, the areas where their children could use some, or in some cases a *lot*, of improvement, these areas could be directly and effectively addressed. I shared my thoughts about how each student was doing. In some cases, these thoughts included comments such as "needs to work on," or "struggles with".

I also believed that my administration would be supportive of my "no-guff" approach, and that I would be lauded for my frankness and honesty.

I was wrong.

Unfortunately, what awaited me was quite the opposite. I received a stack of report cards filled with slashes and rewording suggestions in – eek! – red pen. I felt like a child being reprimanded for a poorly written assignment! As I sat down with a member of the administration, I was told that my comments were, in many cases, "a little harsh."

Harsh? I prefer the term "honest."

As the discussion proceeded, I became increasingly frustrated. I was being censored! Worse even, I was being told, quite simply, to do what I felt was to sugar-coat my comments.

I was livid, but I dutifully reworded the report cards. When I reread and compared the different versions, it became obvious to me that the last set of comments just were not adequately conveying the sense of what I wanted to get across.

When I begrudgingly handed them in, I was praised for being so positive. Through that experience I learned this reality: I am a pretty decent politician. I serve many

publics. And, as much as I hate to admit it, my job is much easier to do when my publics – all of them – are happy!

Like so many things in life, I discovered that writing report cards is an art not unlike politics. It is a skill that requires both tact and a way with words. Like the famous interview question, "What is your greatest weakness?", writing report cards demands that you find a positive way to say something that, well, is just not good.

I have also learned that my job involves P.R. – a lot of it! How I present myself, how my students present themselves, and how students from past years will speak of their experiences in my class – it all reflects on me. For me, P.R. is the most challenging part of my job. What I have learned is that if kids are having fun, then parents will be happy, and happy parents, as a general rule, mean a happy administration.

So in the end, our careers are not so different, my father's and mine. Our occupations, though different in nature, entailed many of the same challenges and pitfalls.

Mr. Smith, my father – they were born politicians. As for me, I'm still working on it! |

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