

## Variations on a Theme: Staff Development's Many Forms

# A Positive Inservice Experience in Negative Behavior Change

If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.

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This aphorism has special meaning for more than 300 teachers and administrators who spent one day trying to use only positive comments in all their social interactions. They were instructed to make no negative statements for 24 hours and then asked to report what they had learned from the experience.<sup>1</sup>

From the evaluations, five categories of common reactions emerged.

1. *Level of awareness*—76 percent of the participants were surprised to discover that they were less positive than they thought they were prior to the positive thinking/acting day. The exercise forced them to an increased level of awareness of their tendency to react negatively. Several focused on attitudes and habits they had not been aware they had. Others became more conscious of the negative attitudes prevalent among their peers. The remaining 24 percent in this category found they were positive at work but negative when dealing with family and friends.

2. *Level of difficulty*—75 percent of the participants found it difficult to be

positive. Many simply couldn't think of positive responses or ways to handle certain situations. Nineteen percent of the teachers found their positive statements backfired—some generally disruptive students took advantage of the situation and acted out more than usual.

3. *Conduct improvement*—71 percent found others behaving in a friendlier manner. This included increased cooperation from others, fewer arguments, and a noticeable improvement in conduct, attitudes, and warmth.

4. *Instructional/administrative style change*—22 percent of the group changed their lesson plans or methods as a result of the positive-thinking assignment. Realizing the challenge of a day devoid of negative comments, several teachers planned activities they knew their students particularly enjoyed. Others involved students in planning activities and made special efforts to make favorable comments to everyone they encountered.

5. *Decreased stress*—28 percent of the participants felt exhilarated, eager, and energetic after putting in a day working at chores they normally regarded as

drudgery. Thinking and acting positively had so reduced the normal stresses of their jobs that they looked forward to incorporating the experience into their daily routines.

Only 2 percent of the group found the experience to be less than positive. The challenge to change one's behavior can be frustrating if not threatening; indeed, the great majority of the participants failed to make it through the 24 hours without a few negative comments slipping into their conversations.

Overall, however, many old maxims of sound educational theory were dredged up from nearly forgotten methods classes—things like involving students in planning, making drill work interesting, being courteous, encouraging students to become self-disciplined, being a good listener, and asking thought-provoking questions. As one of the teachers wrote on the evaluation form, "I have learned a lesson that will be useful for all life and all time. I am very thankful." EL

<sup>1</sup>The exercise was suggested by Franz E. Huber in *Promises to Keep, Teaching the Handicapped*, edited by Cherry Houck (Morris Plains, N.J.: Lucerne Films, Inc., 1978).

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