Effective Teacher Commands

As classroom managers, teachers regularly use commands to direct students to start and stop activities. Instructors find commands to be a crucial tool for classroom management, serving as instructional signals that help students to conform to the teacher's expectations for appropriate behaviors.

Teachers frequently dilute the power of their classroom commands, however, by:

- **presenting commands as questions or polite requests.** Commands have less impact when stated as questions or requests, because the student may believe that he or she has the option to decline. The teacher who attempts, for example, to quiet a talkative student by saying, "Tanya, could you mind keeping your voice down so that other students can study?" should not be surprised if the student replies, "No, thank you. I would prefer to talk!"
- **stating commands in vague terms.** A student may ignore a command such as "Get your work done!" because it does not state specifically what behaviors the teacher expects of the student.
- **following up commands with excessive justifications or explanations.** Because teachers want to be viewed as fair, they may offer long, drawn-out explanations for why they are requiring the class or an individual student to undertake or to stop a behavior. Unfortunately, students can quickly lose the thread the explanation and even forget the command that preceded it

Using Effective Commands

Teachers can reduce problems with student compliance and make their commands more forceful by following research-based guidelines (Walker & Walker, 1991):

Effective commands:

- **are brief.** Students can process only so much information. Students tend to comply best with brief commands because they are easy to understand and hard to misinterpret.
- **are delivered one task or objective at a time.** When a command contains multi-step directions, students can mishear, misinterpret, or forget key steps. A student who appears to be noncompliant may simply be confused about which step in a multi-step directive to do first!
- **are given in a matter-of-fact, businesslike tone.** Students may feel coerced when given a command in an authoritarian, sarcastic, or angry tone of voice. For that reason alone, they may resist the teacher's directive. Teachers will often see greater student compliance simply by giving commands in a neutral or positive manner.

- **are stated as *directives* rather than questions.** Perhaps to be polite, teachers may phrase commands as questions (e.g., "Could we all take out our math books now?"). A danger in using 'question-commands' is that the student may believe that he or she has the option to decline! Teachers should state commands as directives, saving questions for those situations in which the student exercises true choice.
- **avoid long explanations or justifications.** When teachers deliver commands and then tack lengthy explanations onto them, they diminish the force of the directive. If the instructor believes that students should know why they are being told to do something, the teacher should deliver a brief explanation prior to the command.
- **give the student a reasonable amount of time to comply.** Once the teacher has given a command, he or she should give the student a reasonable timespan (e.g., 5-15 seconds) to comply. During that waiting period, the instructor should resist the temptation to nag the student, elaborate on the request, or other wise distract the student.

References

- Walker, H.M. & Walker, J.E. (1991). Coping with noncompliance in the classroom: A positive approach for teachers. Austin, TX:: Pro-Ed, Inc.

http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/schoolwide-classroommgmt/effective-teacher-commands