



POSITIONAL AUTHORITY

By Wilson McCaskill

The less personally and socially capable children are, the more guidance they need in a GPS. The more complex the issues they are dealing with the more guidance they need. The more emotionally damaged a child is the more guidance she or he needs. The more dysfunctional their home lives the more guidance they need and if school has convinced a child that they are not good enough, for whatever reason, to do well in school, considerable and skillful guidance will be needed.

Guidance is not the supplying of answers but the asking of insightful and penetrating questions that facilitate the discovery of answers or at the very least deep thought about the problem. Guidance can be the proposal of a solution while attaching the option of refusing it. In which case a better argument, in defense of the solution and support for its use, needs to be mounted in the hope that the solution will be tried.

Guidance is leading the horse to water and bringing it to the conclusion it should drink. And when it does drink, letting it own that decision without inadvertently suggesting that the horse's motivation for doing so was to do as it was told or to please you.

Teachers who operate from positional authority assess the ideas, actions and strategies of their students from the point-of-view of their personal approval. Their sentences invariably begin with "I" followed by a value judgment based on the degree of pleasure the idea, action or strategy will give them.

These personalised value judgments all carry weight because of the teachers implied position as the boss of the classroom. Imagine the number of times a person in authority has said to you, "Well, of all the ideas, I really like that one" which is politely using their authority to end the discussion and means, "Decision made, would you please go ahead and get it done." The further implication of this remark is that if you do go ahead and get it done they will think more highly of you and you won't get into trouble.

Positional authority remarks are disempowering and train children to do things merely to please the teacher or to avoid disappointing the teacher or getting her upset or angry. This invariably backfires by dividing the class into those who are always trying to please the teacher and get her approval and those for whom the teacher's anger or disappointment is less important than maintaining their own sense of power, dignity and status with peers. There is a third group and those are the students that spend much of their time bouncing between pleasing and upsetting the teacher and basing that decision on whichever gives them the greatest personal profit.

The yellow Life Raft poster asks children, "To do the right thing because they think it is the best thing to do." Employing positional authority, to manage children, soon has them abandoning this morally sound and empowering principle to adopt the *authority*



dependent motivation of doing things to avoid punishment or to be liked for it or to be rewarded for it. The use of positional authority does not assist students to become self-motivated, self-managing, independent learners.

EXAMPLES OF POSITIONAL AUTHORITY REMARKS:

- You are all working so hard and that makes me very happy.
- What a terrific suggestion. You have made my day.
- I think that is a brilliant idea.
- You have put a smile on my face.
- Your behaviour really upsets me.
- Can you see how disappointed I am in you?
- That has got me in bad mood.
- I expect you to behave in a way that makes me happy.
- No, you can't. I'm too upset with you.
- Stay away from me. This class has got me in a bad mood.
- How dare you speak to me like that.
- I am your teacher. You will do as you are told.
- I am older and smarter than you. That's why you can't do that.
- I love having you in this class.
- Can you see how much you have disappointed me?
- You are sitting so beautifully, Mary. (Implying that you are so pleased she is.)
- Look how beautifully Mary is sitting everyone. (Implying that Mary really pleases you and if others copy Mary they will please you just as much.)
- Do you really think I'm going to be impressed with that type of behaviour?
- I don't care what you think.
- No. Go away. I'm not interested in your excuse.