



A Simple Formula for Changing Our Behavior

by Peter Bregman

"Whoa! What are you doing?" I asked aghast.

I had just walked into my daughter's room as she was working on a science project. Normally, I would have been pleased at such a sight. But this time, her project involved sand. A lot of it. And, while she had put some plastic underneath her work area, it wasn't nearly enough. The sand was spreading all over our newly renovated floors.

My daughter, who immediately felt my displeasure, began to defend herself. "I used plastic!" she responded angrily.

I responded more angrily, "But the sand is getting all over!"

"Where else am I supposed to do it?" she yelled.

Why won't she admit when she's done something wrong? I thought to myself. I felt my fear, projecting into the future: What would her life look like if she couldn't own her mistakes?

My fear translated into more anger, this time about how important it was for her to admit mistakes, and we spiraled. She said something that felt disrespectful to me and I raised my voice. She devolved into a crying fit.

I wish I could say this never happened before. But my daughter and I were in a dance, one we have, unfortunately, danced before. And it's predictably painful; we both, inevitably, end up feeling terrible.

This is not just a parenting dance. I often see leaders and managers fall into predictable spirals with their employees. It usually starts with unfulfilled expectations ("what were you thinking?") and ends in anger, frustration, sadness, and loss of confidence on both sides. Maybe not crying. But the professional equivalent.

I'm always inclined to ask: Why do I react the way I do? The answer is a complicated fusion of reasons including my love for my daughter, my desire to teach her, my low tolerance for messiness, my need to be in control, my longing for her success, and the list goes on.

But it doesn't really matter.

Because knowing why I act a certain way does not change my behavior. You would think that it would. It should. But it doesn't.

The question that really matters -- the hard question -- is how do I change?

First, I need a better way to respond to my daughter. For this, I went to my wife, Eleanor,

who is truly a master. I asked her how I should have handled it.

"Sweetie," she said, role playing me in the conversation with my daughter, "There's a lot of sand here and we need to clean it up before it destroys the floors, how can I help?"

Simple and effective:

1. Identify the problem
2. State what needs to happen
3. Offer to help

That's a great way to handle it. Think about any problem you face with someone at work. I don't suggest you start the conversation with "Sweetie," but the rest is applicable.

I watched a manager get angry at a direct report (we'll call him Fred) for a sloppy, unclear presentation he gave. The manager was right -- the presentation was unclear -- but the way he responded damaged the employee's confidence and Fred's next effort wasn't much better. Instead, he could have tried this:

"Fred, this presentation made six points instead of one or two. I'm left confused. It needs to be shorter, more to the point, and more professional looking. Would it help if we talk about the point you're trying to make?"

No frustration. Not even disappointment. Just clarity and support.

Another time, I watched as a CEO got annoyed at his direct reports for presenting plans that were not reflective of the budget commitments they had made. His emotion was understandable. Appropriate, even. But not useful. An alternative might have been:

"Folks, these plans don't reflect the budget numbers we agreed on. Those numbers are non-negotiable. If you want, you can let me know where you are getting stuck and we can brainstorm solutions."

Identify the problem. State what needs to happen. Offer to help. Simple, right?

But -- and this is the strange part -- in my situation, I couldn't bring myself to do it. As I thought about it, I realized my impediment.

It didn't feel authentic.

I believe strongly in leading and living with authenticity. And I was angry and worried about my daughter's future. So responding calmly, in that moment, would represent a disconnect between how I felt and how I acted. That's inauthentic.

Which is when it hit me: Learning -- by definition -- will always feel inauthentic.

Practicing a new behavior, showing up in a new way, or acting differently, feels inauthentic. Changing a dance that's been danced many times before will never feel natural. It will feel awkward, fake, like pretending. The hedge fund manager was angry, the CEO was annoyed. Not expressing those emotions feels fake.

But it's much smarter, more likely to compassionately teach the people around us, and a better approach to getting them to reverse their ineffective behaviors.

If we want to learn, we need to tolerate the feeling of inauthenticity long enough to integrate the new way of being. Long enough for the new way of being to feel natural. Which, if the new way of being works, happens sooner than you would think.

Yesterday, my daughter was doing homework late at night and I had to ask her to work in the dining room instead of her bedroom because her younger sister needed to go to bed.

But, before I did, I paused. I empathized with the challenges she would feel, being asked to leave her room for her sister. Being asked to do her difficult homework in a place that wasn't as comfortable.

"Sweetie," I said, "Your sister needs to go to sleep and we need to move you into the dining room. How can I help?" Identify the problem, state what needs to happen, and offer to help.

It felt weird. Like I was being overly solicitous. Fake.

But it worked.

After I helped her move, she quickly got back to her work.

Then, as I was walking out, I heard her say "Dad?" I paused at the door and looked back at her. "Thanks," she said, without looking up from her book.