



# Teach Others How to Treat You

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

In our world of continuous people-contact, we are constantly confronted with interactions that enhance or diminish our state of well-being. We learn to deal with situations and people in a way that enhances lives while also preparing for that next challenging contact. Of course we value positive reinforcement, the expressions of confidence in our work and the occasional accolade. We naturally appreciate being treated fairly with respect and compassion. Yet, we also know that nagging feeling that indicates our discomfort in some relationships or situations.

From a professional viewpoint, that can occur when: we feel pressured to do things that we are currently unable to do; or we believe that we are the subject of ridicule; or, we feel under appreciated. New teachers often feel they must not complain about any perceived personal injustice, if they want to get the permanent job; while seasoned teachers may feel that they must give up their commitment to “time-proven” strategies rather than risk being ostracized.

From a personal viewpoint, similar difficulties may arise. We may feel that a friend or family member is expecting us to give more than is feasible for us, with our resources of time, energy or finances. We may feel that we are contributing more than our share, while others give little, despite their abundance. This sense of injustice is common when there are issues of parental responsibilities, elder care, shared financial obligations or other areas of contention.

## The Inevitable Impact

It would be unusual for us to complain when we are treated with respect and consideration; however, we often question behaviour when we feel that we are treated unjustly. We try to understand why and often wonder what others expect of us. This questioning is a critical pre-requisite to understanding and changing unwanted interactions.

Not all “mistreatment” is a deliberate attempt to harm us. In fact, some of it is dressed so altruistically that we question ourselves for resenting the contact. E.g., “Well, you have to admit that when you run that event, there is never a hitch but every year that you don’t, we have major complications.” What is that? Is it a compliment, or just a trick, playing on a need to

prove something? You already know that you run the event without a problem. You don’t need someone else to confirm that. What you do need is some time and space for other things and maybe even a break from that event! When your body starts to react, take the time to think clearly about what is really happening.

Either professionally or personally, when we feel mistreated, whether we believe it to be unintentional or otherwise, we still develop a sense of resentment. Subsequently, our bodies react with signals of trouble, telling us that there are real issues. Unfortunately, we often ignore the headaches, fatigue, muscle tension, irritability and sleeplessness until it becomes so dramatic that it interferes with our productivity and causes noticeable complications in relationships. Eventually our behaviour changes unreasonably, to accommodate and minimize our stressors. We stop answering the phone at home because we fear it will be another unpleasant interaction; or we dread staff meetings because we know that we will be expected to accept yet another inordinate request. If we pay attention to our feelings and our behaviours, we recognize this threat to our health and acknowledge that it is time to take action.

## Understanding Expectations

During our lifetime we develop a set of values and standards that we try to maintain and express in our behaviour. Through our interpersonal interactions, others develop an impression of who we are and establish their own set of expectations for our behaviour. These expectations influence how others interact with us in the language they use and behaviours they exhibit in our presence. These expectations largely determine what others give and receive from us; what others try to get away with in our relationship; and, when, why or how others approach us.

We routinely see examples of how one person’s behaviour can vary with the company they keep! We know that a colleague will freely ask a favour of us but would not make that same request of another colleague. We can easily see these seemingly contradictory behaviours as we look at colleagues, friends and family members. If we look closely, we can even notice it in strangers.

“Better ask someone else. You know not to talk to him when he’s reading.” “Oh, it’s Tuesday, there’s no point in trying to arrange a meeting with her today.” “If you need that done right away, go to Pat, she helps everyone.”

How do we get those reputations and, more importantly, how do we change them to be more helpful? Be aware that the more frequently we repeat behaviours the more entrenched they become as habits and the more predictable we become. That’s a good thing when we are trying to get into a healthy routine, but it is a not-so-good thing when it leads to interactions that challenge our overall well-being.

When we adopt attitudes that neglect the basics of our personal well being, in lieu of the wants, well-being or needs of others, we put ourselves at risk. There is a fine line between genuinely helping others and giving what you can’t afford, for the benefit of others.

### **What can we do about what others think and how they treat us?**

We must re-educate those around us. Part of that process is to change how, and what, we communicate to others. Remember that communication happens as we live and interact. It is not only our deliberate transmission of information but also the expression of who we are according to our attitudes and behaviours.

To empower ourselves to regain control over our lives, we withdraw our permission for others to control the expenditure of our resources. Instead, we choose how to spend our resources of time, energy, emotion and finances. By assuming this responsibility and taking action, we can have greater satisfaction with our lives and specifically, within our relationships.

Consider the following steps to managing your interactions with others and gaining control over the way you are treated:

#### **1. Recognize how others treat you.**

So often when we are treated improperly, whether it is disrespect in our workplace or domestic abuse, we may not consciously define this as wrong, until someone else points it out. Although the psychological and even physical impact may be great, we tend to avoid the internal scrutiny that would cause us to acknowledge that our interactions are unhealthy.

#### **2. Know why others continue to treat you as they do.**

Whatever the original underlying reason, the fact remains that someone has been able to continue unfavourable behaviour without adequate accountability. This means that the behaviour has become an established pattern and is unlikely to change without

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being challenged. It will be up to you (and your supports) to create an environment which prevents the behaviour in the future. Start the process by questioning uncomfortable treatment.

### **3. Know how you want to be treated.**

This sounds simplistic but we often don't carefully reflect on how we want others to treat us and then compare that to the way in which we are being treated. Until we look at our needs and behaviours, we cannot expect that others will intuitively know how we want them to treat us. We also cannot assume that everyone has the same concept of respectful interactions. Identify your own goals, limits and boundaries. If you find certain language or behaviours offensive, ask others to not use them in your presence. You may not change their personal attitudes or overall behaviour but you may cause them to behave differently around you.

### **4. Define your needs.**

Be clear about the things that are important to you and the things that motivate you. Understand your needs and appropriate ways to meet them. For example, if it is important for you to fit in with a new school, volunteering to help with every committee and activity is *not* an appropriate way to satisfy this need. Very soon you will be exhausted, will have no personal time, will have paid a high price in the other areas of your life and will start to resent the way you are being treated by your new staff. But remember, you will have taught them how to treat you! They learned that you are willing to take on the extra duties without complaint, that you are the first to volunteer and if they need or want favours, you are the person to ask. More reasonably, you can limit your volunteering and your level of responsibility until you are more comfortable with your colleagues, the environment, the expectations of your position and have refined your school interests.

We each have needs which may be common to others or unique to ourselves. Typically, we can expect to have some desire to: experience success and achievement; belong to the school team; be respected professionally and personally; have a defined territory, space or role; engage in leadership activities; and, to be known as a "good teacher". Think about your actions in your school environment. How does your expression of each of these needs support or interfere with you being treated the way you want?

Occupations tend to attract individuals based on specific interests and abilities and jobs supporting or rejecting individual traits act as filters for occupational longevity. Teaching may attract individuals who are organized and concerned with order, more than

some other occupations might; and, because of the tasks associated with teaching, those without strong organizational skills may experience more job stress and negative attention than their more organized colleagues. If your needs include enhancing skills or enlisting support, get started with that.

### **5. Understand how to communicate your needs and expectations.**

The power of effective communication cannot be overrated! Giving mixed messages, misreading cues and not knowing or understanding the background are all obstacles to good communication. They are also reasons why we cannot create assumptions by relying solely on what we see and interpret in a snapshot interaction.

This common example of inaccurate communication occurs so frequently that we accept it as a social norm: "How are you?" "Fine." (Spoken convincingly and without elaboration) Our needs for privacy, not burdening others, appearing in control, or maintaining distance are underlying personal traits which dictate such an interaction. However, it may present a deliberately inaccurate message. Rather than keep people guessing and drawing the wrong conclusions, be more direct with your information and your needs. "Thanks for asking, but right now I don't want to talk about it." This gives a completely different message.

First, know the message that you want to give others. Then learn how to give it – clearly and appropriately.

### **6. Decide to teach others your new message.**

Consistently present the message that you want people to hear! Do this through your language and your actions. If you are trying to protect your health and relationships from time and energy drains, you need to show that. Otherwise, colleagues and family interpret your priorities as the things on which you spend your personal resources.

The things that teachers most often describe as interfering with their well-being are: the lack of time they set aside to care for themselves and their families; and the attention and energy demanded (and given) to work tasks and taken from self and family. It is important to ensure that we don't create an environment where we teach others to take from us, that which we cannot afford to give.

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*Claudette Coombs is a coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Judy Beranger (ext. 265).*