

Ten Tips For Class Advisors

By Bob Burton

As director of student activities at Fallbrook (Calif.) HS from 1966 until July 1996, I learned some valuable lessons along the way. Perhaps a few of these nuggets will help you in your work in student activities.

1. Know Names

Although the moment in time occurred 25 years ago, its memory has remained clearly fixed in my mind. I was walking across the campus at Fallbrook HS as students were going from one class to another. As I passed a tenth grader whose name I had recently learned, I said, "Good Morning, Nancy." From the pleasantly surprised expression on her face, I realized that Nancy Comer was not aware that I knew her name. Time passed, and Nancy Comer went on to become student body secretary, Homecoming Queen, and a California State Speech Champion. Selected to speak at her graduation ceremony, Nancy Comer's entire speech centered around an incident in her sophomore year when someone for whom she had respect called her by her name. Nancy told her classmates and the audience that she decided then and there that she wanted to become involved in the positive aspects of school.

Obviously, similar situations occur in schools, as well as in businesses, on a daily basis. Think about a time when someone called you by your name when you weren't aware the other person knew your name. It probably made you feel pretty good. We all value the fact that others know who we are.

Right about now, I can hear some readers thinking, "But I'm not good with names." If this applies to you, decide right now to make an effort to improve. Simply think of one student whose face is familiar but whose name you don't know. Find out the name of that student. And then, next time you pass that kid on the campus, call him by his name. It'll make *both* of you feel good. And I

guarantee, it will make you want to repeat your small act of kindness again and again. Knowing people's names is a way of showing others that we care. And, as you've often heard, people don't care how much we know until they know much we care.

2. Nothing Unexpected Please

Don't surprise your principal. Advise him or her of all plans for upcoming class events. One of the last things you would ever want to happen would be for your principal to receive a phone call from a parent whose child was injured during a class activity about which the principal knew nothing. Remember the three "Cs" of dealing with your principal: "Communicate." "Communicate." "Communicate."

3. Communicate Clearly

A few years ago, we needed to send a post card to all students, informing them of the Kick-Off Dance, held the week before the first day of school. Mailing labels needed to be affixed to 2,200 postcards. At a council meeting, I asked Robbie Shea if he would get six friends to meet two days later at nine o'clock in the morning at the Student Body Office, for the purpose of preparing the mailing. Always cooperative, Robbie replied "Sure!" However, two days later at nine o'clock in the morning, *not one* of the guys was present. Not Robbie, and not one of his buddies. Fortunately, six or eight cheerleaders were just finishing practice and they were willing to stick all the labels on the postcards. The job was done. I saw Robbie a day or two later and immediately asked, "Hey, what happened?!" I could tell he knew what I meant, but his answer was puzzling: "Yeah, what happened?!" Robbie said, "Where were YOU?!" I told him that I was there and asked him again, "What happened?!" He said, "All I know is, we were there. I had all nine guys there at six o'clock." "What?", I asked incredulously. Robbie repeated himself, and it was then that I realized the problem: I had asked for six kids at nine o'clock and he'd arranged for nine kids at six o'clock. AAUGH! We both shook our heads. I realized that I'd been reminded of another lesson: it's important for a leader to make sure that others clearly understand what is

expected of them. Obviously, the misunderstanding could have been avoided in a number of ways. At the time of my request, I could have asked Robbie to repeat back to me exactly what I wanted. Or, I could have written on a 3x5 card, “6 guys at 9 a.m. Thursday—Student Body Office” and then “thank you” at the bottom. Ten seconds. That’s how long it would have taken to ensure that Robbie clearly understood. A phone call to Robbie at home on the morning after my request would have served as a thoughtful reminder—in this case the phone call would have saved the day.

4. Class Dynamics

The class councils that seem to be most successful are ones in which all members are encouraged by the president to participate in the planning and executing of all activities. Remember the basic principle of leadership, “people tend to support that which they help to create.” Advisors need to meet with the president prior to the school year to emphasize the importance of making all officers feel like their opinions matter.

5. Giving Criticism

From time to time, it becomes necessary to criticize a class officer for something he did or didn’t do. This criticism can hurt quite a bit, especially if the student leader has a great deal of respect for the advisor. So, remember always to begin your comments by pointing out one or two positive things that the student has done. Your critical remarks are guaranteed to be received much more favorably if the other person hears something genuinely positive first.

6. It’s Student Activities

One day a number of years ago, I was trying to encourage vice president Danny Elwell to make an announcement to the student body in a particularly emphatic way. Danny interrupted me after a minute or so and said words that have rung in my ears ever since. “Hey B.! I can’t say it like that. That’s YOU. You want me to be YOU. I’m not YOU; I’m ME.” I got his point and we went on from there.

Like most student leaders, Danny wanted an advisor who cared and who cared passionately. But, more than that, Danny wanted and needed an advisor who could let go so that he could take charge in his own way. He reminded me that I needed to validate student leaders for who they are and let them be themselves. As advisors we need to work with kids to help them develop a tight plan for an activity that considers safety, covers time constraints, and is within the law and school board policy. And then we need to step aside and hand the activity over to a student leader so he can put his own stamp and character on the event.

7. Confidentiality

I share this lesson in the hopes that other advisors won't have to learn it the hard way, as I did. It was a miserable experience—easily the worst thing that ever happened during my 30 years of working with kids.

A \$300 wireless microphone, used to introduce a lip sync competition, had “disappeared” the day before. The word was out among caring students: “Keep your ears open for news about the microphone.”

Late in the afternoon, three student athletes, all of whom I knew quite well, entered the student body office where I'd been working alone. As they came in, one said to me, “May we talk with you confidentially?” I immediately thought of the missing wireless microphone and said, “sure.” Before I had time to think, one of the students was telling me that the three of them had brought beer to a varsity basketball game on their team bus the night before. I gave the fellows what I thought was wise advice. But, in the hours that followed, I realized that I had made a huge mistake. I had no right to guarantee confidentiality to the three students. I would now be expected to tell other school officials that which I knew. It was a nightmare.

The lesson? Should a student request confidentiality of you, immediately ask whether the subject matter involves a violation of school rules or of the law. And,

if the answer is affirmative, inform the student that you can't guarantee confidentiality.

8. Will You Help Me?

I've often listened to students express frustration over the fact that they couldn't get a classmate to help with a class project or to participate in a class competition activity. Whenever I inquired exactly how the student requested assistance, the answer invariably was something like "Do you wanna be in Friday's class competition?"

Many years ago I heard popular motivational speaker Mark Scharenbroich speak on the topic of getting others to help. Scharenbroich said that a person who wants another to do something needs to state the situation so the listener clearly understands what is needed. And then, the one asking for assistance needs to look the other person in the eye and simply say, "Will you help me?" Teach kids to use those exact words.

Here's an example: "Hi Julie, my name is Fred. I'm not sure that you remember but I am vice president of the class and I have to get participants for each week's class competition activity. This Friday we're going to have a candy cane pass—12 kids from each class are going to pass a candy cane back and forth without using their hands. It's real easy and everyone who does it gets a free candy cane. Anyway, I really think you'd enjoy participating. Will you help me?" Julie said, "Sure."

Most people like to feel needed and they have a tough time turning down a request to help another person. My experience bears this out. It is worth taking the time to teach kids how to properly ask others to get involved. Role play various situations while meeting with class officers to remind them how to ask for help.

9. Win

In late August, 1992, my wife Ann and our son Christopher were sitting in the Convocation Center at the University of Notre Dame during a freshman orientation program.

The atmosphere was filled with anticipation because the next speaker was going to be legendary football coach Lou Holtz. Everyone was looking forward to getting the inside scoop from Coach Holtz on the prospects for the Fighting Irish team that fall. However, in the 25 minutes that Holtz spoke to Class of 1996 and their parents, not once did he mention football. Instead, he told the new students of the need for them to be considerate of others and to use their time wisely. Holtz made a big impression on our son when he pointed out the many choices that Notre Dame students have every day after classes: intercollegiate athletics, intramurals, campus clubs, community service, or just plain fun with friends. Holtz suggested that the best way to decide what to do with one's time at any given moment is to remember the acronym WIN: "What's Important Now?" Good advice for all of us and especially good for young people who are faced with important choices each and every day of their lives.

10. Checklists

If you began your advising assignment by being handed a written job description, complete with checklists of various class activities, consider yourself lucky. Be sure to make a conscious effort to update your lists as the school year goes by. Computers make the editing process virtually effortless.

On the other hand, If you are serving as a class advisor without the benefit of written guidelines, make the time to jot down everything that needs to be done to ensure the success of a particular class project. Develop checklists and specific reminders so that you, or the person who follows you, will have a better idea of how to proceed next year.

Bob Burton served as the director of student activities at Fallbrook (Calif.) HS for 30 years until his retirement in 1996. He was a Charter member of the Hall of Fame of the California Association of Directors of Activities, as well as CADA's first nominee for the National Association of Student Councils' Warren E. Shull Advisor of the Year Award. Bob *Spirit Works... Turn It On!* containing nearly 1,000 specific ideas covering pep rally organization, noontime activities, staff appreciation activities, fundraising projects, and class competition games is available at www.spiritworks.com. This article is reprinted with permission from the September 1998 issue of *Leadership for Student Activities*, copyright 1998 National Association of Secondary School Principals. For more information on NHS/NJHS and NASC products and services to promote excellence in middle level and high school leadership, visit www.nhs.us and www.nasc.us.