

Chapter 39

Ford's Responsible Thinking Process

In schools, prisons, assembly lines, and other settings where people are required to spend long hours under considerable restriction, the inmates often get “out of hand.” They break rules and do things annoying or even dangerous to others, sometimes accidentally, sometimes deliberately. Typically, the authorities conclude that “discipline” is needed. Most people believe that discipline can be improved only by tighter restriction and more severe enforcement of the rules. PCT prescribes the opposite; the way to achieve greater discipline is to *increase* the degrees of freedom—to increase the opportunities of students or inmates to control their perceptions, to reach more of their goals.

I will begin by offering an observation from a janitor in an Australian school in Brisbane, Queensland. One day, he realized that he had been noticing some changes in the behavior of the students. He mentioned to the principal the changes he had been noticing. He then learned from her that the teachers had been learning to cope with disruptions in their classrooms by a new method. The principal asked the janitor to write down his observations, and she invited him to join the new program. Here, from Chapter 29 of a book by Edward E. Ford (1997, p. 218), is what the janitor wrote:

I have found that since RTP began in our school a number of things have changed. . . . There are now no cheeky kids around. No basketballs on the walkways. No more smart aleck remarks. Children like to help with the rubbish. They like to help clean the school yard and the gardens. It's a pleasure to walk around the school yard and see how the atmosphere in this school has changed. The kids seem a lot happier now, not so much fighting and arguing. The children keep the toilets cleaner. They treat one another

with more respect and play better together. I think this works on teachers as well, as I don't hear them yelling any more.

Ed Ford was long a social worker and counselor in Arizona when, in 1982, he was one of seven people attending the first meeting of the Control Systems Group. Ford found that PCT illuminated the thinking he had been doing about his work, and he attracted the interest of Tom Bourbon, whose work you have encountered earlier in this book. In a foreword to Ford's second book on discipline, Bourbon (1999) wrote this:

In 1982, I organized the first meeting of people interested in perceptual control theory (PCT). . . . Ed Ford was one of the seven people who attended. . . . In his *Discipline for Home and School, Book One*, Ed described his Responsible Thinking Process (RTP). Ed tried to ground RTP in PCT science. When some of his colleagues from the public schools joined Ed at our meetings and described dramatic positive results using RTP, some of us who do laboratory research on PCT wondered if it could be as good as they said. Then I went to Phoenix to visit several schools that used RTP. . . .

What I saw on that first visit convinced me that some of the dramatic accounts of RTP were correct, but I also saw schools where it did not work all that well. . . . [Now], after visiting dozens of schools, we have a clear picture of why RTP works extremely well in some schools, less well in others, and very poorly in a few. . . . RTP works best when the educators understand that children and educators alike behave to control their own experiences. When RTP works best, children understand that, too (pp. xi-xii).

In Chapter 19 of that same book, Bourbon (1999a, p. 149) wrote:

Ford's RTP is designed to help students and teachers control their own perceptions, in school, without unnecessarily disturbing other people. When one person does disturb someone else, perhaps unavoidably or unknowingly, RTP provides a way to deal with the disturbance in a way that minimizes conflict. In schools where RTP is used well, teachers and students [and janitors] are equally likely to say that their lives have changed for the better.

No doubt you can see from even those few words that the RTP is not a procedure for repairing minds that are presumably defective, nor is it a grab-bag of stimuli that will presumably cause children to learn the multiplication table or say "Yes, ma'am," when spoken to. It is a process of facilitation and enabling—a belief and attitude and process with which staff and students in a school can enlarge their degrees of freedom for making use of the social and curricular aspects of their environment in pursuing their purposes.

In any organization, people will inevitably stumble over one another. Timothy and Margaret Carey (2001) put it this way:

. . . rules in an RTP school can be considered in terms of learning, safety, and social laws. The rules in an RTP school are designed to create environments where participation in learning opportunities can occur optimally. . . . Disruptions in RTP schools are [defined] to occur in the context of these three areas. . . . Other things, however, are *not* considered disruptions in RTP schools. For example, a daydreaming student can be frustrating for an educator who would prefer the daydreamer to be working at a faster rate. But [in RTP] daydreaming is not considered to be a disruption to safety, social laws, or the learning priorities of other individuals (p. 13).

Within this environment, it is recognized that, from time to time, some people will disturb the experiences of other people. . . . Sometimes such disturbances are quickly resolved; at other times, the disturbances recur. For a small percentage of students, these recurrences become chronic.

. . . when people share [an] environment, the way for them to interact harmoniously is to learn how they can experience what they intend while at the same time minimizing the extent to which they prevent other people from doing the same. . . . The point is that disturbances *always occur* in social

groups. RTP has not been established to eliminate these disturbances. Educators using RTP . . . spend time exploring ways of minimizing the extent to which they occur and ways of resolving them respectfully when they do occur (p. 15).

HOW IT CAN LOOK

Now I turn to another writing by W. Thomas Bourbon (1998). This is what you see happening:

When a student disrupts, the teacher asks a few simple questions, in a calm and respectful voice:

"What are you doing?"

"What is the rule?" or "Is that OK?"

"What happens if you break the rule?"

"Is that what you want to happen?"

"What will happen the next time you disrupt?"

The questions afford a choice to a student who disrupts: either he can stop disrupting and remain in the class, or he can continue to disrupt, and thereby choose to leave the classroom and go to the Responsible Thinking Classroom (RTC). For students who stop disrupting when they answer the questions the first time, nothing else happens. After teachers use the RTP for a while, the first question is often all they need. When they hear that question, most students who are disrupting immediately stop and indicate that they understand what they are doing and how it violates guidelines for the ways people should treat one another. On the other hand, if a student continues to disrupt after hearing the questions the first time, the teacher says, calmly, "I see you have chosen to go to the RTC" (p. 155).

That response was standard in 1998. In an e-mail to me of 16 August 2002, Ed Ford said that the response currently recommended is: "What are you doing?" "What did you say would happen the next time you disrupted?" Then, "Where do you need to be now?" Bourbon (1998) continued:

While they are in the RTC . . . students can sit quietly, or read, or do homework, or sleep. They can do anything, so long as they do not disrupt the RTC. Whenever a student decides she is ready, she works on a plan for how to return to class (p. 156).