

...public order is a fragile thing, and if you don't fix the first broken window, soon all the windows will be broken.

James Q. Wilson
Author and Scholar

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Fixing Broken Windows: Defending Your Culture

Why People Misbehave at Youth Sports Events

When an example of bad youth sports behavior hits the mainstream media, journalists often ask me why the parents or coaches involved act in such an awful way. My first response is, "Because they get away with it."

People act inappropriately at youth sports events because there is no price to pay for acting this way. When parents and coaches can't get away with it, they tend to not act this way.

If people know bad behavior in the Development Zone has consequences, they are much more likely to act appropriately. Effective message bombardment described in Chapter 6 gives people unmistakable signals that their behavior will be noticed.

However, humans tend to be boundary pushers, so we shouldn't expect Setting the Table, even when done exceptionally well, will prevent all misbehavior, especially since we are talking about people's offspring. Intervention will be required to protect your culture when – as it inevitably will – inappropriate behavior occurs.

The Broken Windows Theory of Crime Prevention

Let's say a criminal is looking for a place to do his dastardly deeds. He drives through a neighborhood and sees litter on the ground, graffiti on the walls

and broken windows. He may conclude that people in this neighborhood aren't paying attention, that this is a place where he can ply his criminal trade.

Then he drives through another neighborhood where the lawns are carefully manicured, the walls are graffiti-free and no broken windows are visible. He realizes he is much more likely to get caught in a criminal act in this neighborhood. Crime averted.

James Q. Wilson pioneered the "Broken Windows" theory of crime prevention, the idea that keeping a neighborhood in good repair tends to result in less vandalism and crime.

The same dynamic can work for you in creating and maintaining your culture. Let's take a typical broken window in youth sports: a parent yelling at an official over a perceived bad call. If this violation of the culture is not addressed immediately, there will likely be more violations in the near future, so it is important to intervene when windows are broken.

Several years ago I was doing a leadership workshop for a soccer club in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of the leaders of this club mentioned he recently had been at a soccer tournament at which he saw something he had never seen before.

A parent from another club was getting all over the officials. The other parents of players on that team quickly hustled the offending individual off the field away from the game. I asked if he knew what league the team was from and he warmed my heart by saying, "Mustang Soccer," a long-time PCA Partner in Danville, California.

Levels of Intervention

Most of us would oppose someone receiving the death penalty for stealing a loaf of bread. We would likely agree with Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and the Ramones: "Let the punishment fit the crime."

PCA has developed a system of progressive intervention to protect the Development Zone, divided into "informal" and "formal" levels. If the violation continues, the level of intervention increases.

Informal Levels: One of the perks I enjoyed working at Hewlett Packard was not having to wear a tie except when hosting a customer visit. Usually no higher-up person needed to enforce this rule – when the host forgot to wear a tie, a co-worker reminded him.

Wearing a tie for a factory visit was simply “the way we do things here” at Hewlett Packard. And if you didn’t, someone reminded you because many employees, not just supervisors, supported the culture.

In a strong culture, violations tend to be handled informally. When people act inappropriately, someone, often not an official organization leader, intervenes to let them know their behavior is unacceptable.

Informal levels of intervention do not depend on any official action by the designated leaders of an organization. Any member of the organization can invoke them and, in fact, it often works better when a non-leader intervenes. The ideal person to intervene is someone on the same “side” as the person violating the norm.

- ① **Nonverbal Prompt:** PCA’s Tina Syer was at a college field hockey game where her former Olympic Development Program players were competing. She noticed the father of one player ferociously getting on the officials. She happened to be wearing a PCA Honor the Game button, and without saying a word, she handed it to him. He asked, “If I put this on, does it mean I can’t yell at the ref?” She nodded her head. He thought for a moment, then put the button on and was silent the rest of the game.

The theory of cognitive dissonance tells us that people want to appear consistent. As strange as it may seem, if someone is simply wearing a button saying, “Honor the Game,” he will tend to match his behavior to conform to the button he is wearing even if he doesn’t agree with the button!

Notice that Tina’s tactic worked even though there was no Development Zone culture established at this college field hockey game. It works even better when there is an established and well-understood set of norms for

how people are to behave. Often, all you have to do with a misbehaving person is to give them a nonverbal reminder, but not always.

- ② **Gentle Verbal Reminder:** Let’s say handing out a sticker or card with a message has no impact on the person who is misbehaving. Now it’s time to step it up just a bit and give a gentle verbal reminder. “Excuse me, remember we want to be good role models inside the Development Zone and not embarrass our kids.”

This is most effective when the person giving the reminder is familiar, such as a parent whose child is on the same team. Such a statement from a parent from the other team might escalate the situation rather than help.

And it’s best when this is a reminder of something that is already well understood. You can only remind someone that this behavior is not okay in the Development Zone if you’ve done a good job Setting the Table. With a culture in place, 90 percent or more of the time steps 1 and 2 will deal effectively with the situation, but not every time.

- ③ **Assertive, But Non-Confrontational:** You’ve tried the nonverbal prompt and the gentle verbal reminder. Now, ideally with a smile on your face, you become more assertive: “Hey, that’s not the way we do things here.”

This should be done in an as friendly and non-confrontational way as possible. When saying this, make sure not to invade the person’s personal space. Stay a few feet away so as to not make him feel threatened. Again, the last thing you want is to escalate the situation.

This may turn into a conversation.

Violator: “But that was the worst call I’ve ever seen. It was a travesty!”

You: “I understand, but remember it’s important for us to Honor the Game and give our kids the chance to develop resiliency in the face of a bad call.”

You want to avoid escalating the situation, but you also want people to understand that their bad behavior is being noticed and will be addressed. You don't need to do this perfectly, but you do need to do it. If the violator ignores you or becomes belligerent toward you, have the self-discipline to simply walk away. You have done what you needed to do.

The Role of Culture Keepers: The best way to ensure appropriate intervention when violations occur is to establish a system of "Culture Keepers." This involves designating one or two parents on each team to have the "job" of reminding other parents on that team to Honor the Game. See the following chapter for a detailed description of how Culture Keepers can help fix your Broken Windows.

Although a strong program of Setting the Table combined with the first three informal steps will deal with as much as 99 percent of the problems, it doesn't work 100 percent of the time. So you now need to back off the Informal personal confrontation and activate the Formal part of the process. You do not want to push violators to the point where there is a violent or nasty confrontation with you.

Formal Levels: Formal levels of intervention are invoked when the Informal levels have failed. PCA developed the following formal system – with an "Official Warning" and two stages of "Removal" – but you can amend it or develop your own.

- ④ **Official Warning:** At this point, the violator needs to be informed in a formal way that his behavior is unacceptable. This can happen one of two ways: you or another official representative of the organization can issue the warning. The other way is to work with the officials so they have a system of issuing formal warnings, ideally through the coach of the violator's team.

It is important to educate and empower game officials in this process. When a parent or other spectator is being belligerent, the official approaches the coach of the team the parent is supporting and lets the coach know that his or her team risks forfeit of the game if the coach is

not able to correct the fan behavior. The coach then explains that to the violator as an official warning that the team may forfeit the game and that the violator will be removed.

- ⑤ **Self-Removal & Removal:** If the violator is still not behaving, you as a designated representative of the organization or a game official must give him the option to remove himself. "Sir, you will need to leave this gymnasium. Until you do, the game will not continue. If you do not remove yourself, we will call the police."

Now none of us want to have to call the police to remove a violator, and this system of levels of intervention is designed to make that very unlikely. However, if a violator persists through all the levels, you cannot allow that person to harm your culture. So, although calling the police is a last resort, it is a tactic that needs to be an option in your program.

Culture Building: There is another necessary action – using the results of your reaction to negative behavior to build your culture.

- ⑥ **Publicize:** Social Learning Theory tells us that people in groups learn how to behave by watching what other people do and seeing what happens. Whenever there is a violation of the norms inside the Development Zone, it's important to let people know that this behavior was challenged rather than ignored.

Publicize the fact that there was a violation and that organization leaders acted to deal with it. Without mentioning names, explain what happened, for example, via e-mail to your organization's members:

"Last week a parent became belligerent at an official's call at a game. He refused to act the way we expect in our culture. Unfortunately, we had to ask this person to remove himself. He will not be allowed back to any of our games until he has shown that he can act in a way that ensures the integrity of our Development Zone which is, as you know, about developing Better Athletes, Better People."

Dealing with Ambiguity – The Traffic Light

Sometimes you just don't know how to handle a situation. Consider the following. The coach of a U-11 baseball team has his pitcher intentionally walk a strong hitter to pitch to a handicapped youth who proceeds to break down in tears after striking out for the last out of the game. This triggers widespread outrage even though intentional walks are legal in this league. What should the leaders of the organization do?

PCA developed the "Traffic Light" to deal with ambiguous situations like this. When something happens that you definitely don't want to happen again, give it a Red Light. Prohibit it and change the rules. Personally, I think intentional walks have no place in youth baseball until about high school.

You could also Green Light it: "The rules allow this. And, although this was unfortunate, intentional walks are part of baseball."

If you don't know how you feel about it, Yellow Light it: "We aren't happy with this, but we're not sure we want to ban intentional walks. So we'll monitor to see if this kind of thing happens again. If it does, we may decide to change the rule."

The Traffic Light allows you to *not* have to respond when you're not sure what the best action is. In many cases, no action will be required in the future because this problem simply won't come up again. If it does, you can act then.

The Bottom Line

The importance of a *system* of graduated intervention cannot be overstated. As Beverly Hills Basketball League founder Bruce Horowitz warns, "If you don't enforce your culture, people will see very quickly that you don't mean business." And that means a Development Zone culture that will not survive for long.

Take-Aways

- 1 **If broken windows are not fixed promptly, you get more broken windows. You need a system of intervention to keep violations of the culture from spreading.**
- 2 **Use progressive levels of interventions including "Informal" and "Formal" levels. "Let the punishment fit the crime" by dealing with violations in a gradually increasing way.**
- 3 **In a strong culture, violations tend to be handled informally. Everyone knows what is expected. And most people support it, so non-leaders help remind violators of how they should behave.**
- 4 **Use the power of Social Learning Theory and publicize what is done about violations as a way of letting people in your organization know that violations will be challenged.**

DEVELOPING Better Athletes, Better People

A Leader's Guide to Transforming
High School and Youth Sports into
a Development Zone



By Jim Thompson
Foreword by Doc Rivers



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BETTER PEOPLE

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