



The Power of Positive Expectancy

I heard it!

There was a man who was an avid outdoorsman. He loved the mountains of southwest Virginia, where he grew up and later retired. The man had a young son who often accompanied him on many hikes and hunting trips through those hardwood forests of the Blue Ridge. The boy was constantly amazed at all the things his father could see and hear in the forest, things that he mostly missed. One day, as they were walking, the man stopped, knelt down, and pointed out where a deer had rubbed its antlers on a small tree. The boy had just walked right past the tree and didn't notice. Another time, at dusk, the man stopped quickly and whispered "shhh... listen." The boy froze and listened. The man said, "A wild turkey just flew up into a tree to roost for the night." "I didn't hear it," said the boy. "Listen carefully," said the man. "There may be another one." The boy listened so carefully his ears started to hurt. After a few long moments... it happened. Wumpf, wumpf, wumpf, wumpf, rustle, rustle... silence. "I heard it!" the boy whispered, wide-eyed at how loud and distinctive the big bird's wing thrusts sounded in the quiet forest.

That man was my father, Claude Rutherford. That makes me, Mike Rutherford, the son who couldn't see much in the forest. Later in life I asked my father how he could see so much on those walks. He thought for a long moment and replied "I think it's because I expect to see things. I know they are there. *If I'm in the forest and don't see anything interesting for a while, I know that's not because there's nothing there. It's that I'm not looking well enough.*"

Those times with my father taught me a valuable lesson that I was later able to apply in my role as a school administrator. Looking for amazing things in the forest requires some of the same skills as looking for amazing things in classrooms. First among those skills is positive expectancy. What we see is mightily affected by what we expect to see.

An administrator's key role as feedback provider is dependent on the administrator's skill as classroom observer. One cannot provide insight about something one cannot himself see. Our ability to develop teachers and teaching is dependent upon our ability to recognize pertinent happenings during a classroom observation. What we recognize, indeed what we even notice, during a classroom observation is dependent on what we expect to see once inside.

"We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." Anais Nin

It is important to remember that we see with our minds, not merely with our eyes. During an observation, an administrator's brain doesn't simply compile observational data. Rather, it quickly extracts a subset of all observable things and constructs meaning from that subset (Argyris, 1991). Not only does what we notice affect our meaning, but how we construct meaning affects what we notice, or do not notice, next (Boroditski, 2011). Meaning making is a subjective process. It is powerfully shaped by our expectations.

Perhaps this is why humans are so susceptible to being fooled, tricked, conned, robbed, and scammed. Our expectations of what will happen next warp our actual observation of what is happening now (Crimmins, 2016).

An essential component of effective classroom observation is awareness of the relationship between what is expected and what is seen. Keen observers can make this relationship work in their favor by actively and intentionally modifying what they expect to see prior to an observation. We can call this process positive expectancy.

Principles of Positive Expectancy- a starter list.

1. First, quiet your mind. Be fully present, wishing to be nowhere else.
2. Consciously shift thinking from evaluation/assessment to curiosity/learning.
3. Move from *"I hope there are positive things to observe here."* To *"There are learning opportunities here, I hope I'm sharp enough to see them."*
4. Move from *"I'm looking for these 5 things."* To *"I'm looking for what's here."*
5. Expectations cut both ways. Don't over-notice success in a skillful teacher's classroom and don't over-notice struggle in a less skillful teacher's classroom.
6. Expect to learn something valuable from every classroom observation, no matter the level of teaching skill. Hold yourself accountable for this learning.
7. Keep a log or journal of your insights from each and every observation. Monthly or so, look for themes and patterns in your collection.

Bibliography

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