

# Ya' Know What I Mean ... (no I don't)

Every day we make assumptions about people knowing what we mean. Those expressions are frequently expressed as “Ya’ know what I mean?” or “O.K.?” And yet, the reality is that often people on the receiving end of either statement either have no idea what we were talking about and may be embarrassed to say so.

“Any questions?” is the classroom version of “Ya know what I mean?” Having observed teachers for more than three thousand hours as an educator for 46 years, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard teachers ask students, “Any questions?” either after introducing a lesson or at the near the end of a period.

There are inherent problems with saying “Any questions?” The biggest one is that the teacher assumes students know enough about what the teacher said to be able to ask a question! These problems have to do with listening or communications skills.

There are three areas of working in schools where improving listening and communications skills can make a world of difference. Using effective communication skills can dramatically improve a teacher’s knowledge of and the extent to which students understand what they are expected to do. Using effective listening skills can deescalate potentially volatile conflicts between students or between teachers and students. Using effective listening skills can often stop grievances between staff and administrators from moving to higher levels.

It has long been known that an important part of effective teaching is the opening to a lesson, which should accomplish several things. First, it should review what was discussed in the prior lesson. Next, it should introduce what is to be covered in the day’s lesson. And finally, it should check for student understanding or comprehension of the prior lesson and the expectations of the current one.

After introducing a lesson a teacher often asks, “Any questions?” This assumes that the students understood what the teacher was saying. A more effective technique is to ask students to state what they think they need to do in the current lesson in their own words. They can also be asked to identify instructions, tasks or expectations that are unclear. If a student has understood, his answer can be praised for listening carefully and paying attention. The student’s answer then reinforces the teacher’s message. If the student does not understand, the teacher then has a teachable moment to ask the student what they understand and build around that. As important, if the student does not understand, talking the lesson introduction through with the student sends a message to him and the rest of the students that no one gets to opt out of class.

Similarly when a student says they don’t know an answer or didn’t do the homework, the easiest option is to leave them alone. The more challenging and effective option is to say, “Let’s work it through together.” A creative teacher uses the work with the student as an opportunity to engage the student and review the question, problem or task with the class.

The same approach can and should be used in talking about classroom rules or rules for an activity. Rather than the teacher saying “These are the rules,” ask students to describe what rules are needed to make an activity work and why they’re important. These are approaches that have been around for a long time in Responsive Classroom, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) and a program that was called OUNCE (as in an ounce of prevention), all designed to create positive approaches to improving behavior.

In classrooms and hallways there are opportunities every day to deal with conflicts or highly emotional confrontations where active listening skills can make a world of difference. Active listening refers to a set of steps one can take to assure the person with whom you’re speaking that you’ve heard what they

said and to check with them about their understanding of what you've said. One example is "What I think I heard you say was.... Please let me know if I've heard you correctly." Another example is "Please tell me in your own words what you heard me saying."

Confrontations among students or between students and staff come from many places. One of the most common is that the student perceives that the staff member "doesn't understand me" or "doesn't care about my point of view." In some cases, removing the student from the site of the confrontation (where other students may be observing) and taking several steps will help. Ask the student to tell you in their own words what happened. Ask the student to tell you how they felt about what happened (In many cases students have very limited vocabulary for how they feel. They may say that they want to "f... somebody up", and not be able to say that they were angry, upset or offended). Ask the student to tell you what she thinks should happen next. In each case, reflect back to the student what you heard. This reflection is not a sign of agreement with the student; it is simply acknowledging that the student has a right to be heard. There is a growing body of research that shows that these steps can help to diffuse very tense situations between and among students and students, students and staff.

Similar listening techniques or strategies can help ameliorate tensions between staff and administrators that can lead to grievances. As an administrator I have frequently heard teachers grieving principals or other administrators saying, "He didn't care what I thought"" or "I don't think she even heard what I said." I have especially seen this while working through the growing pains of building new teacher evaluation systems or relationships among staff in buildings. These issues among staff may turn around disagreements about programs or policies in a school, personal preferences or simply style differences in approaching students or other staff in the school.

The approach is straightforward but takes time and commitment. In one situation between two administrators it took several hours to draw out from both people what their perceptions were of the actions of the other person. They both expressed strong feelings of anger and offense. What was important was not to get each person to agree with the other's point of view but to get them to be able to accurately restate what that perspective was. The next step was to get each person to acknowledge that the other person had a right to their point of view.

At the end of the session both administrators agreed to meet regularly to share information with each other about the plans of the other. They also agreed to try to work through differences in approach on their own, but if that if that was not possible they could go to the district's Chief Talent/Human Resources Officer as a third party mediator. At the end of the year, both individuals reported that while everything was not "hunky dory," their work relationship had become much more manageable.

So what's the point of talking about improving communications skills in teaching and addressing conflicts? Immense amounts of energy are spent every day in schools and work places with people being angry, upset or offended by the sense that "nobody cares what I think." As important, in many classrooms, teachers wonder why students don't understand what they perceived were very clear instructions. Students often get angry at what they think is poor teaching because they didn't understand enough of the instructions to know what to ask.

The message here is simple.

In classrooms and hallways improving communications and active listening skills can make a huge difference in both improving teacher effectiveness and student achievement and reducing tensions and resolving conflicts. Among staff and administrators the same sets of skills can help to reduce the

amount of time people spend accusing each other of not understanding or caring and increase people's sense that their points of view have value and that there are avenues available for solving problems.