

How nice do I really have to be?

real school

I firmly remember many things from my first year or two of teaching. Some are a lot fuzzier. But one memory I had very early on was being told by one old staffroom sage not to be too nice. “Huh?” I muttered, thinking that this wasn’t mentioned in my four excruciating years of university. “You know” he went on, “don’t let them walk all over you. A lot of do-gooders will tell you that you’ve gotta be nice to the kids and you’ve gotta allow them to express themselves. Well, I’m hear to tell you that the only thing you’ve gotta do is show them who’s in charge. That’s Teaching 101 as far as I’m concerned.”

Welcome to Teaching!

I remember the fog of confusion I was in as I walked to that classroom. I had been ready to be very “nice” and super positive. I was about to walk in as educational Pollyanna and create my own little classroom of happiness. Yet, here was an experienced practitioner telling me this was bad policy. Was I right? Was he right? Or was there a way that we both might have a point.

The short story is that I survived that year by mostly being a nice guy. I occasionally got grumpy and occasionally chose some practice and strategies in error. Show me a graduate teacher who hasn’t! It was a fabulous year of learning and I hope it also was for my students too.

What I later discovered was that I was right to look for a hybrid model; that a balance of firm and fair in my practice was a desirable endeavour and that my reflection would best be geared towards thw most effective balance quotient. Enter Marcial Losada.

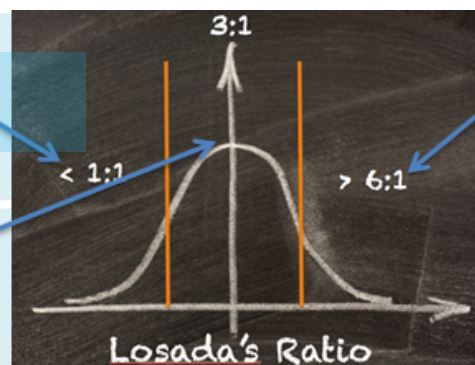
Losada, with the assistance of renowned psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, looked hard at the way human beings interact. He looked at the positive interactions and their impact – and he looked at the negative. He also counted them and compared the ratios of positive versus negative interactions against the perceived and actual function (or dysfunction as the case may be) of the relationships within which they occurred. What Losada came up with was the right ratio ... or the balance between firm and fair that I’d been looking for.

Want to know the answer. Well, it turns out that one negative interaction to every 2.9013 positive interactions can take a relationship out of a languishing state and into a flourishing state. Isn’t that exciting? Yeah – I didn’t think so either! As with most statistically valid research the real challenge is what to do with it.

So let’s consider the Losada Ratio more practically, on a bell curve where we round the desired ratio to 3 to 1:

Where there is around one negative for every positive, the relationships is in dysfunction. The student will feel you are picking on them incessantly.

Where a ratio of around three positives per negative is achieved the relationship is the most functional. It’s conducive to learning, safety and can be leveraged by the teacher for improved student performance.



Where there is around one negative for every six positive, the relationship is also in dysfunction. The student feels you are educational “Lego Movie”, where everything is awesome! This is irritating and undesirable.

It seems that when it comes to the question of how “nice” we need to be to make our classrooms work, we just found the answer! The contextualising of Losada’s work in your classroom might be your most critical success factor this year. Good luck with that!

**“When shit happens,
turn it into fertilizer.”**
-- Kute Blackson

THE CHEAT SHEET Don’t have time to absorb the whole article today? Here’s the big points ...

1. Look to balance firmness and fairness at all times.
2. The 3:1 Rule actually has some merit.
3. The best relationships include negative feedback experiences.
4. You can smile before Easter.
5. A focus on the positive without eliminating the negative is key.

AITSL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS ... and you addressed them by reading!

The Big One

4.2 Manage classroom activities.

But also ...

3.3 Use teaching strategies

4.1 Support student participation.

4.4 Maintain student safety.