Book Review: The Whale Done School

*Transforming a School’s Culture by Catching Students Doing Things Right*

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Introduction

The Whale Done! School is the third book in the Whale Done! series. It focuses on the proven power of positive attention that can be used in the process of educating children and working with people. The Whale Done! School is based on a true story of an effective school turnaround led by implementation of “Whale” done practices. It demonstrates how students’ academic performance and behavior drastically improve when teachers employ the same science used with training killer whales. Characteristics of this model include building trust, focusing attention on what is right, and redirecting undesirable behavior towards positive outcomes.

The Science Behind Killer Whale Training

Research supporting the effective training practices of Killer Whales began because of the animal’s enormous size. Trainers at Sea World were able to motivate whales to perform magnificent tricks. They realized that it was most effective to react when positive actions were demonstrated by the whales. The more you give attention to any negative behavior, the more frequently it will be repeated. Instead, if you focus on the desirable behaviors and what is being done right, then it will be done correctly more often. The largest underlying factor for this training to be successful is the formation of a relationship. Trainers take adequate time to understand each whale individually and create a “game” out of accomplishing their goals.

When trainers find a whale is not demonstrating the desired behaviors, they redirect the whale’s attention to the task at hand or something else they are good at. If the whale is able to complete the assigned task, they are instantly rewarded. Sometimes a reward comes in the form of food, and other times it is rubbing their heads (which is something they like). Through practice, trainers found that a food reward meant the whale had to be hungry in order to perform well. This became an unhealthy practice for the animals.
Their practices began working as they stimulated the Killer Whales when they did things right and quickly redirected when something was done wrong. This training allowed for the whales to make a shift in their actions which encouraged them towards the desired behavior. The aspects the trainers focused on were key elements in their success. The more attention you pay to any behavior, the more it will repeat. In order to motivate the whales, the trainers had to know how to focus their energy.

**Human Similarities**

It is amazing how often humans are not expressing their appreciation for someone’s efforts. We are very quick to criticize someone for not meeting our expectations. It is natural for us to want to place the blame on someone or something else. However, research shows that there is a lot of power in providing another person with positive verbal recognition or feedback. It is human nature to look for someone doing something wrong rather than something right. If this training was successful in shifting the thinking and actions of whales, how could humans apply this shift to their practices?

**ABC’s of Performance Management**

The ABC theory of performance management supports stimulating good performance in the correct ways. The steps consistent of the three ABC’s. The first step is the activator and it stimulates the desired behavior performance. This can include components such as verbal and non-verbal signals, instructions, and trainings. The second step is the behavior, which comes after the initial activation. This is the performance that actually occurs. The third step is the consequence, which is what happens after the behavior has been displayed. There are four kinds of consequences which include: no response or negative response and redirection or positive
responses. The consequences of redirection and positive responses have proven to be the most powerful.

**Redirection**

It is impossible for everything to be done correctly all the time, so the question arises when asked what proactive actions to take when things go wrong. The authors of the Whale Done! Series believe it is a matter of energy management. If a person does not demonstrate the right action, then you should not pay too much attention to it. Instead, this attention should be used to redirect them towards the desired or right action. Redirection can be shown by describing the error and showing the negative impact of the action, without placing any blame.

Research indicates that people must know it is the behavior that you find unacceptable, not them as a person. You remove pressure by not placing the blame on the person, but rather refocusing on the goal. It is important to clearly remind or tell how the action should be done and make agreements on how to reach this target. Both parties have to be committed to the commitment and trust should be expressed to the person.

**Catching Something Right- Whale Done!**

Catching a person doing something wrong is easy, you just have to wait until they make a mistake. The authors of the Whale Done! series refer to this as the “Gotcha” response. People are often left alone until they do something wrong. In order to catch people doing the right thing, it requires a different focus. This response is known as the “Whale” done. Research shows that if you are positive with people, you will get more positive results in return.

It is important to know not to wait for the actual results, you should praise people for the progress. This ultimately requires a greater level of patience and self-control, but by acknowledging good actions you will stimulate people to continue behaving in a desired way.
This will help them achieve the goal you have set them up with. You will notice that they will begin to behave as you requested because they like the response and will become internally motivated.

**Creating A Whale Done! School**

In today’s increasingly challenging times of educating children, it can powerfully transform a school’s culture to shift the focus to the power of positive attention. Many students served in urban schools experience high levels of stress each morning before arriving on the campus. It is easier for teachers and staff members to focus on what desired behaviors students are not displaying, without realizing their practice is more harmful than helpful. Both student behavior and academic performance can improve drastically when schools employ the power behind a “Whale” done. When adults can build relationships and trust with students, focus on what they do right, and effectively redirect negative behavior the entire climate and academic success of a school can change.

**Conclusion**

The Whale Done! theory demonstrates that it is possible to motivate people in a different way. When you react in a positive way, it will build a trusting environment with mutual understanding. People, especially children, will then choose to focus on the positive things because you pay more attention to those behaviors. The more attention you pay to a behavior, the more it will be repeated. By redirecting without blame when something goes wrong, and using a “Whale” done when right, you will see that people start to get self-motivated and will perform in a better way.
Resources