Words Matter

Colonel (Retired) Thomas H. Palmatier

“Small people talk about people, medium people talk about things, but big people talk about ideas.” I heard that only once in my life. It was 1970 and my high school band director, Tom Brown said it. To this day, I remember it vividly as it struck my 16-year-old self as the most profound thing I’d ever heard. To this day, anytime I find myself gossiping, I’m reminded about how I was failing to be a “Big Person.” If a fleeting comment from my band director can stick with me for nearly 50 years, how important are the things that you say to your students?

During my more than 37 years in Army Music, I made well over 100 visits to music units all over the world. Some of these were inspections and some were simply assistance visits. That meant that I had the privilege of interacting with over 5,000 Soldier-Musicians and had personal conversations with many of them. Over the years, I’ve crossed paths with lots of them and am embarrassed to say that I didn’t recall some. On more than just a few occasions, they referenced something that I had said and remarked how much it helped and, in some cases, they said it proved to be really important in their lives. Each time I left those conversations wishing that I had recalled these “words of wisdom” but it also reminded me of how every single interaction we have with people as an educator or a leader is an opportunity to do great good or great harm.

A few years ago, I attended a Midwest Clinic presentation by my long-time friend, Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser. He shared a number of instances where he had spoken harshly to someone or spoke negatively about someone else. His bottom line for us was that positive words are fleeting while negative words leave eternal scars. As he spoke, all of the (too) many times that I had spoken harshly to someone came flooding back. When he ended, I sat there for quite a while. Eventually, the line of people wanting to speak to Tim ended and I was able to tell him, “Thanks for ruining my day!” and then shared with him how meaningful his words had been.

While I was Commander/Conductor of The United States Army Field Band, I was discussing with a senior noncommissioned officer how I could better communicate with the musicians and she said, “Praise them.” To folks of my generation (OK, Boomer!) that doesn’t seem like it would work. As we talked about it further, she explained that if I praised good things and withheld praise when things needed improvement, they would quickly fix those things themselves and there would be no need for me to point out problems. After decades of Army leadership positions and many, many leadership courses and seminars, she taught me about real leadership!

As I teach in classrooms as a guest clinician or as a substitute teacher, I try to identify the students who are perhaps not the most gifted, but are clearly trying hard. At the end of the class as they are leaving, I try to quietly tell them what a good job they did. The smile that inevitably results is what all of us educators live for,

So, for the many musicians over the years that I harmed with a harsh word, falsely thinking that I could balance it out with a bit of praise, I hope that you will accept this apology. The good news for all of us is that it’s never too late to learn, to do better; to BE better.

Next month I will share some thoughts about concert programming. As always, feel free to contact me at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.