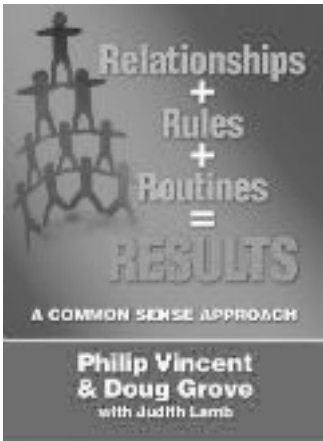


Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results: A Common Sense Approach

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Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results: A Common Sense Approach		
Author:	Philip Vincent & Doug Grove (2013)	
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“You have in your hands a rather simple book with profound implications for your career as an educator, regardless of your position in education.” So begins the introduction of *Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results: A Common Sense Approach*, and the authors deliver just what they present: a straightforward, 89-page practical guide to establishing a thoughtful, engaging learning environment that will ultimately yield not only improved academic outcomes, but also, and perhaps more importantly, enhanced social, emotional, and ethical opportunities through which all stakeholders will benefit. Written amidst the current controversies in educational reform in the United States, where high stakes testing, teacher accountability and effectiveness, and new national standards dominate politicians’ and the public’s attention, these authors, with almost a combined century of teaching experience, attempt to usurp focus on the charge at hand: helping students develop the social and ethical skills they, and the country will need, to flourish (p. 5). By using a casual, conversational tone and a collective voice of “we” throughout the book, the authors make the reader feel an integral part of a national movement to “discover or rediscover the reasons why education is the most honorable and important profession on earth” (p. ix). Using just enough academic research to deliberately and successfully validate arguments and convince readers of the need for the practices they suggest, the authors are careful not to overwhelm the reader and maintain a practical, manageable approach, leaving the reader feeling re-invigorated and inspired to engage in their position as educator.

Just as the title suggests a simple formula for a successful plan of action, the book follows a similarly comprehensible format, breaking down the seemingly daunting task before teachers, administrators, and schools today into chapter-by-chapter descriptions, examples, and applications of each of the components. The book opens with “Rethinking Our Assumptions” immediately calling on readers to delve into the meaningful introspection necessary for dynamic changes and true fulfillment in education. In this chapter, the authors also establish the rationale for placing priority on creating positive school and classroom climates, citing this as the foundation for “real and sustainable academic improvement across the curriculum” (p. 9). The emphasis on teachers being reflective practitioners is echoed throughout the book, helping maintain a focus on meaningful, intentional, and deliberate practices, a huge shift from the prescriptive, rote lessons, discussions and actions pervasive in current curriculum and professional development.

Chapter 2 addresses the first component of the equation, “Building Positive Relationships”. With clear and concise ideas, organized under similarly straightforward subheadings such as “Can’t We Just Get Along?”; “Research Worth Knowing”; and, “I Have Never Met Better People...”, the task of establishing relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and community members seems both attainable and agreeable. Introducing authentic teachers such as “Uncle Hal” helps the reader visualize the behaviors and attitudes that precipitate meaningful relationships. This chapter also provides 10 suggestions to get started in forging these relationships (Complimentary Tree, Morning Meetings, Clubs, and Community Service to name a few), and each suggestion includes three recommendations for initial steps that can be taken.

Chapter 3, “Understanding and Developing Rules”, unpacks the role that the second component plays in establishing a positive school climate. In lieu of interpreting rules as discipline and consequences, the authors link rules to structure and expectations that must be established and owned by every participant in the building. The authors provide this reasoning: “We cannot empower children to think and act appropriately unless the children learn to function within a structured environment. Structured environments are necessary for the development of positive practices leading to habits that enable a child to strive and flourish within the environment” (p. 36). In this sense the message is not to try to control children with an authoritarian attitude, but rather to support and influence them in a democratic, collaborative setting.

Chapter 4 presents the final component of the equation, Routines, as the habits and practices that “give life” to the established rules and expectations. The chapter’s title, “Determining Routines to Develop Habits of Success”, suggests that teachers and administrators must carefully think through the ways these rules will be enacted in the building: students must be explicitly taught, shown models, and practice these expected behaviors, actions, and language. Consistent with the other components of Relationships and Rules, these Routines are most effective when all stakeholders participate in their creation and execution; from students working in pairs to classrooms learning together to teachers collaborating in teams, the most effective routines are those consistent and owned by all.

The final chapter analyzes Results, but compels readers to consider them not as points of data to drive instruction (as is common practice in the United States today), as “outcomes that indicate the entire learning environment is improving and becoming an environment where all stakeholders can flourish” (p. 66), and even more simply as “indicative of a school

being a great place to teach and learn” (p. 66). In closing with “Results” the authors reinforce their message that education is not just about the curriculum; the desired results of the community reflect the underlying values it possesses and promotes, thus incorporating the humanistic element that is quickly omitted in current education reform.

While *Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results: A Common Sense Approach* may seem like an easy read with its simplistic approach to a challenging feat, its value lies in the deep reflection and practical application that it promotes. Each chapter concludes with a section called “Enhance Your Understanding”, which offers thought-provoking questions and activities that, when truly engaged, the reader will find far from simplistic and obvious. Just as the voice and tone of the book adopts a collective call to action, these suggested practices also promote collaboration and discussion among teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners alike. With such a dynamic, reflective approach, combined with practical, attainable application, *Relationships + Rules + Routines = Results: A Common Sense Approach* makes for an intelligible yet powerful staff read, providing the impassioned inspiration and agency for change needed in so many schools today.

As an early grades teacher working in a multicultural urban center in the U.S. South, I found the book to be compelling because of its focus developing the whole child and valuing the diversity that each individual brings to the classroom and school. Piloting a program in personalized learning in our district, this was one of the cornerstones of our endeavor, and this book proved a valuable resource for our team. During our staff retreat at the beginning of the school year, we used probing questions from the “Enhance Your Understanding” section of the first chapter to incite purposeful discussions that helped set the tone for the year. We also selected “Morning Meetings” as a focus for professional development and invited local experts to delve deeper into training and effective implementation of that strategy. Typically beginning teachers in U.S. contexts receive very little training and support with behavior management. This book offers the introspection and resulting framework they need to establish a strong classroom community from the first day of school. Most valuable is the connection made between rules and routines, explaining the significance of consistency, attention to details, and modeling necessary for enacting expectations so that they are not simply words spoken but behaviors lived in the classroom. Conversely, this book also invites administrators to consider the practices they employ to shape the entire school community and create a climate that is welcoming, affirming, engaging, meaningful, and therefore conducive to learning. With an emphasis on “all stakeholders”, the authors clearly communicate that schools are more than just knowledge facilities. Societal constructs that impact more than just the students who attend them—their reach extends to the staff, parents, volunteers, and community partners alike. For the impassioned educator trying to influence more than test scores and proficiency ratings, it is welcoming to read a practical text that invites, supports, and encourages that brave endeavor.

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