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Have you ever heard the phrase, “move from good to great?” It sounds motivating, however; one has to then wonder, what is the difference between good and great? In his book, What Great Teachers Do Differently, 17 Things That Matter Most, Todd Whitaker explains exactly what separates a good, and sometimes a not so good teacher, from a great teacher. The book is composed of 19 chapters, with each chapter identifying and describing the 17 things that matter most in being a great teacher. Whitaker is a former math teacher and basketball coach from Missouri, who also served as principal in all three K-12 levels.

Prior to considering the 17 Things That Matter Most, Whitaker begins Chapter 1 with the question, “Why Look at Great?” The answer, simply put, is to learn. Anyone who wants to learn something would naturally want to go to the best source possible to receive the information. According to Whitaker, it is pointless to expect to gain knowledge from an ineffective teacher. Most of the characteristics and strategies demonstrated by an ineffective teacher are obviously things you would not want to repeat. In many cases, according to the author, ineffective teachers remain that way because they believe they are doing a good job. On the other hand, great teachers provide a framework of new ideas, in which you can build upon. Whitaker also explained that although there are common variables among all teachers, for example, taking attendance, establishing seating charts, and other responsibilities, it is the differences between these teachers that determine who is effective or ineffective.

Things That Matter Most #1: “Great teachers never forget that it is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school” (p. 12, 123).

Chapter 2 begins the first of the 17 Things That Matter Most, “It’s People, Not Programs.” Whitaker explains that parents are not necessarily attracted to the programs used in instruction, but rather the people behind the programs. To validate this thought, Whitaker points out that when a parent is satisfied with a teacher, he or she is satisfied with the school. Conversely, when a parent is not satisfied with a teacher, he or she typically determines that the school is not good.

As an example of programs as opposed to people, Whitaker envisioned that the open classroom model began with two great teachers who implemented the concept flawlessly. Then the model became the expectation for teachers in many of the districts across the nation. The open classroom model was eventually determined ineffective; however, a closer look would show that it was not the program, but the people behind the program. According to Whitaker, it does not matter that teachers are implementing programs. What matters is how appropriately and effectively they implement the
programs. Great teachers are effective because they focus on people, not the program (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #2:
“Great teachers establish clear expectations at the start of the year and follow them consistently as the year progresses” (p 17, 123).

Teachers typically begin the school year with a set of expectations for students. In Chapter 3, Whitaker explains “The Power of Expectations.” Effective teachers focus on expectations, but ineffective teachers focus on rules and consequences. The gap between what really works with students is the relationship teachers build with them and the consistency of expectations set. When teachers focus on expectations, students try to live up to them. When teachers focus on rules and consequences, students do not really know what the teachers expect. Whitaker does not discount the necessity of rules and consequences, because they are important to establish an orderly environment. Consequences, for example, are established for students who misbehave, so that other students view consequences as unappealing and make decisions to follow the rules. The good thing, according to Whitaker (2011), is that everyone, including teachers and students, get to start all over again every year, at the beginning of the school year. Teachers get to set expectations with a new set of students and students get to try to live up to them with a new teacher.

Things That Matter Most #3:
“Great teachers manage their classrooms thoughtfully. When they say something, they mean it” (p. 24, 123).

Consistency of expectations leads into Chapter 4, “If You Say Something, Mean It.” In this chapter, Whitaker uses an example of football coaches who are trying to get their team to work the way they need them to during practice. Whitaker helped the coaches to see that they were saying the same thing over and over, without learning what was not working. In this situation and in the classroom, Whitaker suggests that expectations must be clearly stated and you must follow through with what you say. Hence, when you say something, you must mean it. Similar to what Whitaker discussed in Chapter 3, in this chapter he states that teachers should focus on the behaviors they
expect from students, not the consequences for misbehavior.

Whitaker cleverly used an example of one prank he enjoyed playing on teachers when he was a child. He would empty their glass of water without them knowing and wait for them to react once they realized it was gone. When he pulled this same prank on one of the ‘best’ teachers, the response was different. She did not respond immediately, but after class, she asked him if he could be in charge of guarding her water to keep it from disappearing. This teacher focused on what she expected, not the consequence for the misbehavior. Whitaker also advised that teachers refrain from threatening to punish the whole class, rather than focusing on the students, one-at-a-time who are really causing the disruptions. In this way, what you say to one student will have more meaning to that student and others, because you can focus on the follow through, as well as the expected behavior.

Things That Matter Most #4:
“When a student misbehaves, great teachers have one goal: to keep that behavior from happening again” (p. 31, 123).

Focusing on expected behaviors also has a way of preventing misbehavior as discussed in Chapter 5, “Prevention versus Revenge.” Effective teachers try to prevent misbehavior, whereas ineffective teachers seek revenge. An example of this revenge seeking would be how ineffective teachers want students to be upset after being sent to the office. Keeping students angry when they are in trouble, does not solve the situation, nor does it improve the student’s behavior. A better approach used by effective teachers is to want students to be better after leaving the office, because the important thing is how they behave in the future (Whitaker, 2011).

Whitaker points out that there are many things teachers might do when students misbehave, such as staying in close proximity, putting the child in timeout, or sending the child to the office. Even with consistency, none of these approaches always work. Quality, according to Whitaker, is the most important variable. In other words, things like yelling, arguing, and sarcasm are not
appropriate, nor are they quality approaches to student discipline. In fact, a better approach is to establish an environment of respect for students, their parents and yourself. When it comes to students, you must respect even the most difficult student to prevent losing the respect that the other students have for you (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #5:
“Great teachers have high expectations for students, but have even higher expectations for themselves” (p 35, 123).

Chapter 6 asks, “High Expectations – For Whom?” Most would think high expectations are only for the students. Whitaker explains, while great teachers do have high expectations for students, they have even higher expectations for themselves. Not only do they work hard to ensure students grasp concepts taught, they also reflect on how they can improve and what the can do differently as teachers. In this way, students have a better opportunity to learn from the best teachers.

Things That Matter Most #6:
“Great teachers know that they are the variable in the classroom. Good teachers consistently strive to improve, and they focus on something they can control: their own performance” (p. 41, 123)

Everyday life contains many variables that determine the outcome of situations. In regards to the classroom, Chapter 7 explores the question, “Who is the Variable?” Some might think that because of the differences in personalities and work habits, the students are the variable. Whitaker clarifies that the main variable in the classroom is not the students, it is the teacher. One example provided is how teachers reflect on reasons why a student is performing poorly. The great teachers will not only blame themselves, they will also work to find ways to improve their teaching performance. On the other hand, the worst teachers will blame the student, parents, and anyone else because they assume they have nothing to improve upon. Ultimately, the teacher can only control or change his or her own behavior in the classroom; therefore, the teacher is the variable and thus, the only one who can influence the students’ outcome.
Things That Matter Most #7:
“Great teachers focus on students first, with a broad vision that keeps everything in perspective” (p. 48, 123).

Another factor in being a great teacher is to “Focus on Students First,” which is the topic of Chapter Eight. Whitaker begins this chapter by briefly discussing change. In leading educational change, the best method to get people on board is to show that the proposed change will benefit students. Some teachers, however, have a tendency to react differently to change, because their focus is on how this impact will benefit them, rather than asking how this will benefit the students. Great teachers have a different outlook because they have a broad vision, meaning they can see the whole picture and always consider the long-term benefits for students. The differences in reactions, places teachers in unofficial social clubs, the Optimistic Club and as Whitaker calls it, ‘the Complainers Club’ (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #8:
“Great teachers create a positive atmosphere in their classrooms and schools. They treat every person with respect. In particular, they understand the power of praise” (p. 56, 123).

A good way to stay out of the Complainers Club is to take a positive approach, as discussed in Chapter 9, “Ten Days Out of Ten.” Taking a positive approach means to treat everyone with respect every day. Everyone includes colleagues, parents, and especially the students. As a teacher, even if you do not like a particular student, you must act like you do and treat them with respect or risk losing the respect of all the students (Whitaker, 2011). Praise is an important factor in keeping students on track. Whitaker shared five strategies that help praise work, based on the research of Ben Bissell (1992). They include:

1. Praise people for something that is genuine and true;
2. Be specific about the praise, because the behavior you acknowledge is typically the behavior that will continue;
3. Praise should be immediate;
4. Praise must be clean, i.e. it should not be given to get something in return and should not include the word “but”;
5. In most cases, the safest way to give praise is in private, so as to not embarrass students or build resentment among peers; and
6. The same strategies apply to staff. Educational leaders are often hesitant to praise staff because they believe people will stop working, they might miss praising someone and hurt their feelings, or they just don’t have time (Whitaker, 2011). Nevertheless, it is important to praise the positive teachers, because they can influence the interactions of the entire school (Whitaker, 2011). Effective leaders accomplish this because they themselves model appropriate behavior.

Things That Matter Most #9:
“Great teachers consistently filter out the negatives that don’t matter and share a positive attitude” (p. 63, 124)

Modeling appropriate behavior is important, but along with that is knowing how to “Be the Filter,” as discussed by Whitaker in Chapter 10. Being the filter means being mindful of how you respond to people. If you respond positively to a simple question, “How are you doing?” it has the potential to uplift the other person. Conversely, if you respond negatively to the same question, it reinforces or initiates negative feelings in the other person. This is also true when dealing with angry or difficult people. If you tell another person about your experience with an angry or difficult person, you have just influenced their opinion about that person. In the same respect, whatever a teacher does in the classroom, impacts all of their students, either negatively or positively.

Other aspects of being a filter include examples like ending meetings on a positive note, staying away from complainers, and establishing an effective separation between your personal life and your professional life. According to Whitaker, filters also relate to perceptions. If you keep saying things like “These kids are bad,” not only will you begin to believe and expect that behavior, but also the students will start to live up to that expectation. Being an effective filter means staying away from the negatives
and focusing on the positives to reinforce what you really expect (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #10: “Great teachers work hard to keep their relationships in good repair to avoid personal hurt and to repair any possible damage” (p. 71, 124).

As educators, we must understand that being a filter and reinforcing the positives benefit students. If educators behave negatively, the impact on students could potentially last a lifetime. Whitaker discusses examples of how to avoid negative impacts in Chapter 11, “Don’t Need to Repair—Always Do Repair.” This title may seem strange, but what Whitaker is saying here is that some people never need to repair, yet they always do. For example, some teachers reflect on their own mood and think maybe they were having a bad day. These teachers further assume that if they had a bad day, their mood might have negatively impacted the students. Therefore, the next day they apologize to the students, just in case they seemed short-tempered in any way. Remember, these teachers have higher expectations for themselves, than they do for others.

Whitaker also suggests that some teachers always need to repair, but actually never do any repairing. Teachers in this case never see the negative impact they have on others; therefore, they never see the need to apologize. According to Whitaker, even when others try to get them to see the need to apologize, they rarely do because of their lack of self-confidence or because of their pride or ego. Whitaker provided a good strategy to use that will help people to repair without changing their beliefs and without communicating an admission of fault. Using a short yet powerful statement, “I am sorry that happened,” causes people to believe you care about what they are feeling (Whitaker, 2011).

Another example provided by Whitaker is teaching children how to repair. When students misbehave, again the focus should not be on the consequence, even though they may ultimately receive one. Rather the focus should be on how to change the student’s thinking, to prevent future misbehavior. In Whitaker’s example, if a student misbehaves, they need to know that the teacher with whom
they misbehaved, will get to decide their consequence. Then suggest to the student that it might be a good idea to apologize to the teacher, before they decide on the consequence. Four positive things come out of this strategy. First, the student learned the benefit of repairing/apologizing. Second, the teacher feels the student will do better. Third, the teacher feels supported because they are included in the consequence decision. Finally, the student will more than likely avoid repeating the same behavior in the future. Effective teachers continuously reinforce positive behaviors, in an effort to prevent misbehavior (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #11:
“Great teachers have the ability to ignore trivial disturbances and the ability to respond to inappropriate behavior without escalating the situation” (p. 77, 124).

“The Ability to Ignore,” as discussed in Chapter 12, is another strategic ability within great teachers and it too reinforces repairing skills discussed in Chapter Eleven. Depending on the situation, great teachers know when to respond immediately and when to ignore the situation until later (Whitaker, 2011). In essence, these teachers give attention when it is needed. Whitaker used an example from a study conducted by Doug Fiore (1999), whereby it was determined that the best leaders know the importance of ignoring minor errors. Constantly pointing out mistakes of others, only causes them to be less creative, less innovative, and less determined to make a difference. The same concept can be applied to students. If a teacher constantly picks apart a student’s work, even the most gifted student will eventually refrain from trying, because they feel like they just cannot get it right. To offset this, great teachers understand that praising a student’s achievement and overlooking minor errors will encourage them to keep working hard (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #12:
“Great teachers have a plan and purpose for everything they do. If plans don’t work out the way they had envisioned, they reflect on what they could have done differently and adjust accordingly” (p. 82, 124)

In Chapter 13, purposefully titled, “Random or Plandom?,” Whitaker focuses on the importance of
planning every situation, in and outside the classroom. In addition to preparing lesson plans, teachers must plan for everyday interactions with students. Some of the planning may appear to be obvious decision-making strategies which everyone should know. However, the examples provided by Whitaker indicate that these decisions are not as obvious to all teachers. In the first example, Whitaker shows how important it is for teachers to take responsibility in planning how students are given the opportunity to choose partners. For example, pulling a name paired by birth months, or other random methods. Students choose partners, but the parameters in which they choose are preset by the teacher. In the second example, Whitaker shows the difference between effective and less effective teachers, as they monitor their students at a school assembly. The effective teacher has close proximity with the students they anticipate might be disruptive. The less effective teacher sits with other teachers and complains about their disruptive students, while taking no responsibility for them. School leaders can apply the same concept to staff who are known to be complainers and disruptors of faculty meetings, by rearranging seats and by having assistant principals sit next to the most negative people. Great teachers purposefully rearrange and adjust the classroom setting to promote and maintain a positive learning environment (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #13:
“Before making any decisions or attempting to bring about any change, great teachers ask themselves one central question: What will the best people think?” (p. 88, 124).

While maintaining a positive learning environment, it is important that school leaders and teachers “Base Every Decision on the Best People,” as discussed in Chapter Fourteen. According to Whitaker, there are three guidelines great teachers use when making decisions. They include: 1) What will be the purpose?; 2) Will this actually accomplish the purpose?; and 3) What will the best people think? The purpose is more likely determined through the goals and objectives of the lesson. Accomplishing the purpose could be answered through assessment results. Figuring out what the best people think takes on another meaning.
Whitaker determined that when decisions are made based on a few individuals, but impact the entire group, the focus negatively impacts the best people. For example, posting a “No Shoplifting” sign in a store does not necessarily stop shoplifters, because they already know they should not steal. However, the same sign might make the best shoppers feel uncomfortable. To the same extent, posting a sign in the copy room limiting the number of copies, might cause copy-abusers to ignore the sign and cause the best teachers to not only take the message to heart, but also feel penalized for something they did not do. If school leaders see the importance of including key staff members in on decisions before they are finalized, they will ensure positive results, because what the best people think, is what matters most (Whitaker, 2011). Besides, principals need the best teachers to influence the entire school, so that everyone is operating from a perspective of greatness.

Things That Matter Most #14:
“Great teachers continually ask themselves who is most comfortable and who is least comfortable with each decision they make. They treat everyone as if they were good” (p. 95, 124).

To fully consider how to make every decision based on what the best people think, Whitaker outlines in Chapter 15, “In Every Situation, Ask Who Is Most Comfortable and Who Is Least Comfortable.” One way to accomplish this is to treat everyone as if they were good. For example, when a negative staff member is vocal during a meeting, let them know that their point is worth discussing and tell them to come and see you in the morning before school (Whitaker, 2011). The person will be uncomfortable with behaving like that in the future. As a leader, you did not devalue them, and most importantly, the best people in the group have more comfort in attending meetings. In another example, a letter was sent home to all parents regarding a late fee charge for after-school care. Only a few people were late regularly and will probably continue, because the letter provided comfort in the assumption that they must not be the only ones late. The other parents, however, become uncomfortable because they have no idea why they are receiving such negative communication.

This relates to the same content discussed in Chapter 3, where Whitaker shared that you should not penalize the
entire group, because of a few people. Whitaker suggests that if you seek input from everyone when making a decision, divide the responses between the ones who agree, the ones who are neutral, and the ones who disagree. Then align the responses with what the best people think. If the best people are in the third that agree, then it is a good idea to move forward. If the best people disagree, then it is a good idea to forego the decision. Ultimately, input should be sought from the best teachers and students, because they are the ones who typically make the right choices (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #15:
“Great teachers have empathy for students and clarity about how others see them” (p. 101, 124).

In Chapter 16, “Put Yourself in Their Position,” Whitaker approaches the strategy of connecting with students. All teachers deal with students from various backgrounds. The difference in how effectively teachers manage the needs of the students depends greatly on their ability to put themselves in the students’ shoes, and attempt to understand the world from their student’s perspectives. As discussed by Whitaker, some students come with knowledge of certain things like good manners, but others need the teacher to model these behaviors, because these were not a part of their world, prior to entering the classroom. A good example of this is telling students to use their “inside voice.” Some students might understand this, but for others, if everyone in their house talks loud, then they do not know the difference between an inside voice or an outside voice.

Another way to assess how well you connect with others is to know how you come across to them (Whitaker, 2011). A good way to accomplish this is to videotape yourself and then watch it later. The tape might reveal a number of things, such as, maybe you talked too fast or too slow, maybe you did not make good eye contact with the students/staff, or maybe your tone was a bit boring. Either way, the connection with the audience was ineffective, but obtaining the self-feedback, provides a platform for positive change. When you focus on yourself, you become more aware of how students think and feel. For example, taking music lessons, bowling lessons or any other type of class, allows teachers and educational leaders to become
students again, and therefore, heightens awareness of their feelings (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #16:
“Great teachers keep standardized testing in perspective. They focus on the real issue of student learning” (p. 109, 124).

“What About These Darn Standardized Tests?,” Whitaker asks in Chapter Seventeen. Everyone knows the importance placed on the outcome of standardized test scores, but should this be the focus? First, Whitaker proclaims that the success of schools, lies in knowing what the school should be doing. Generally, stakeholders agree that schools should focus on academics, manage behavior, and provide a positive environment for students. Second, Whitaker states that schools must know what the standardized tests measure. Knowing what the tests measure, will inform what schools should be doing, but they must keep testing in proper perspective (Whitaker, 2011). Whether you believe in the value of testing or not, you must understand that the results impact your autonomy for decision-making (Whitaker, 2011). Simply restated, if schools perform well on standardized tests, no one interferes with how they do what they do and they continue focusing on what they should be doing. Conversely, if schools perform poorly on standardized tests, outside influences begin to dictate what those schools must do differently, and as a result, the standardized tests become the focus. In addition, the best way to keep testing in perspective is to focus on the issue of student learning (Whitaker, 2011).

Things That Matter Most #17:
“Great teachers care about their students. They understand that behaviors and beliefs are tied to emotion, and they understand the power of emotion to jumpstart change” (p. 118, 124).

Part of focusing on student learning is to “Make It Cool to Care,” as discussed in Chapter Eighteen. Whitaker explains that students and teachers alike will go along with an initiative, but their buy-in is sometimes limited. However, once it becomes cool to care, everything falls into place. Everything discussed in the book in terms of
respect, positivity, and decision-making, lead to an environment where it is ‘cool to care.’ Whitaker used the example of a difficult student who did not care about school, and went to his teacher to get help on a poetry assignment. The teacher had already shown respect for the student, modeled expectations, focused on his needs, and thus, created an environment where it was ‘cool to care.’ In another example, the entire student body embraced a group of special needs students at a partnering school, by purchasing hats, mittens and shirts with the school name on it, as gifts for them. In this school, the students were respected and therefore, knew that it was ‘cool to care’ for the other students.

Everything a teacher does, good or bad, has an impact on students. Great teachers can influence the behavior of other teachers, who do not demonstrate a caring nature by not laughing at their inappropriate behavior (Whitaker, 2011). When teachers become more sensitive to students and to their needs, the opportunity for them to learn increases (Whitaker, 2011). Students know when someone cares about them, and they naturally respond to that person by putting their best foot forward. They want the caring to continue, especially if they are not receiving that positive feeling from anywhere else. Reaching children in this way is the power teachers have and must always understand.

Whitaker summarizes the book in Chapter 19, “Clarify Your Core.” Throughout the book, Whitaker highlighted seventeen things that matter most with great teaching. Examples and suggestions were provided in a way that made it understandable and easy to follow. In reading this book, great teachers can reinforce their skills, while others can learn new skills. Whitaker reminds the readers that the success of a school is determined by the quality of the teachers. Success comes from people, not the programs, and most importantly, success is determined by how much focus is placed on students first.

References


**About the Reviewers**

Lillian M. Harris is the Director for Student Support Services at Atlanta Public Schools and a doctoral candidate at Clark Atlanta University pursuing a degree in Educational Leadership. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications from Columbia College Chicago and a Master of Arts degree in Middle Grades Education from Clark Atlanta University. In 2003, Lillian Harris wrote and received the first NASA Explorer School (NES) grant in Georgia which gave her school funding to improve mathematics and science instruction, historical notoriety, and a lifetime partnership with the National Aeronautics Space Administration (NASA). Adding to her accomplishments, Mrs. Harris was noted as an Honor Teacher by the Atlanta Journal and co-authored an article with two Clark Atlanta University professors, Dr. Bonita E. Flournoy and Dr. Janice Cook-Bax, which published in *The Science Teacher* magazine. Mrs. Harris’ research interests include effective teaching for all students and the impact science and math achievement has on high school graduation rates. She is a member of Alpha Epsilon Lambda National Honor Society, Alpha Tau Chapter, Georgia Association of Educators (GAE), Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Sheila T. Gregory, Ph.D. is a professor of educational leadership and higher education at Clark Atlanta University. In 2005, Sheila Gregory's fifth co-authored book, *Daring to Educate: The Legacy of the Early Spelman College Presidents*, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Also in 2005, she received the prestigious national award of Teacher and Scholar of the Year. Dr. Gregory is the author of seven scholarly books and nearly four dozen articles, book chapters and other scholarly publications. She has been awarded and
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