

STUDY GUIDE

HANDLE *With* CARE

Managing Difficult Situations In
Schools with Dignity and Respect



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STUDY GUIDE

This study guide was created for you, the reader, to encourage you to reflect on your work as an educator and more importantly, to inspire you to act. Our hope is that you will use this guide with teachers, athletic coaches, fine arts directors, support staff, and administration to intentionally examine your classroom and campus culture to ensure that all members of the school community are managing difficult situations with dignity and respect. As you work through the study guide, you will see that it aligns with the four core principles of the best-selling book, *Culturize*, that I have shared below which served as the mantra by which we aspired to impact others with whom we had the honor to serve as school leaders:

1. **Champion for All Students - Never Quit & Invest More Time in Relationships**
2. **Expect Excellence - Model the Behaviors You Want Others to Repeat**
3. **Carry the Banner - Create Positive and Meaningful Experiences**
4. **Merchant of Hope - Everyone Deserves to Be a Part of Something Great**

As you read through the guided questions, you may choose to discuss each question before reading the chapters or you may wait until you finish reading each chapter before engaging in a dialogue with your team. Each chapter is filled with content, strategies, ideas, stories, reflections, anecdotes, quotes, and challenges to provoke honest and meaningful discussion.

Thank you for investing in *HANDLE WITH CARE*, but more importantly, for investing in yourself and others in order to cultivate a community of learners by behaving in a kind, caring, honest, and compassionate manner in order to challenge and inspire each member of the school community to be more and do more than they ever thought possible.

CHAPTER 1

WOULD YOU RATHER I CALL MOM OR DAD?

1. Every educator can relate to good days, bad days, and days that just kick your tail. Regardless, every word and deed either adds positively to the school culture or it doesn't. In what ways do your words or actions intentionally contribute to a positive school culture?
2. It is important to respect the boundaries students establish in terms of what they are willing to share. What strategies do you use to manage delicate situations or conversations with students? With colleagues? With parents?
3. Casas and Kelly state that when we commit to knowing our students personally, we are saying to them, "I see you. I value you. I am here for you." They know it. They feel it. They need it. Adults are no different. How can we work together to strengthen and deepen the relationships we have with colleagues, supervisors, and those who report to us?
4. Casas and Kelly state that adults don't always get it right. How many times have we worked with students about their behavior only to recognize that we as adults sometimes need to work on our own self-management as well? In what ways can we change our approach with students to achieve a better result?
5. Both teachers and leaders often work far too many hours, don't get the adequate sleep and necessary rest, struggle to meet self-care goals including exercise and nutrition, and, at times, place personal relationships on the back burner in service of caring for and guiding other peoples' children. What can we identify that needs to be adjusted, added, or eliminated all together in order to ease the workload for everyone and/or improve staff morale?
6. There is no better way to say, "I care" than to show up for others in times of joy and sorrow. Share a time you "showed up" for someone in their time of need and describe how it made you or the other person feel.

CHAPTER 1

WOULD YOU RATHER I CALL MOM OR DAD?

7. Have you ever been on the receiving end of the ruthless judgment of someone else? It hurts. It makes us feel misunderstood and diminishes our sense of self. How do we respond as a staff when one of our own judges a colleague or supervisor? What core values are we willing to commit to in order to protect and support our own teammates?
8. A sincere apology takes responsibility rather than blame others. Take a moment to practice an apology to a table partner that acknowledges the hurt we've caused and signals a commitment to do better moving forward.
9. Contacting guardians regarding a student's progress/behavior in class can be stressful. Casas and Kelly recommend practical strategies/phrases that they believe would result in a better response. What are some ways you approach a communication home to family members of students? What are some things we should avoid saying or doing?
10. Discuss with your table members what your biggest takeaway(s) was from the introductory chapter? What is one actionable item you plan to implement this school year?

CHAPTER 2

CHAMPION FOR STUDENTS: Culturizing Discipline

1. Describe a time that you championed for a student and the end result? What did you learn from that experience? Would you do anything differently if given the same opportunity again? If so, what would you do differently?
2. Casas & Kelly believe discipline should be viewed as an opportunity for educators to teach and for students to learn—and in some situations, for students to teach the educators, if we are willing to pause and listen. What are some things that you have learned from your students/colleagues that have impacted how you approach student discipline?
3. On page 37 Casas and Kelly share the story of Jamal. Share with a colleague(s) an experience you have had where a student was not reaching his/her full potential. Now discuss alternative, and possibly unconventional, paths that could be implemented for this student (and others) to experience success. What barriers are keeping us from putting these practices into place? What are steps we can take today to change this?
4. Every one of us has experienced the agony of feeling excluded or devalued. At some point in our lives, we have found ourselves on the outside looking in, feeling like we don't fit or belong. It's one thing to say everyone is welcome, but to truly champion for students is to create a sense of belonging in your classroom or school for every single student. What are you willing to commit to in order to make this happen?
5. Casas and Kelly believe that we need to make a shift from *rules* to *agreements* in order to give students a voice and to promote student ownership and accountability. How do you allow students to have a voice in your classroom/school? If we were to ask students what changes they would make in the classroom/school, what do you think they would say? What is keeping you from asking?

CHAPTER 2

CHAMPION FOR STUDENTS: Culturizing Discipline

6. On page 44, Casas and Kelly cite a study on student behavior which suggests that all behaviors - positive or negative, are designed to achieve social recognition. Examine the four categories listed and discuss how staff can help diffuse situations in a respectful and dignified way.
7. If we take time to evaluate the current classroom and building rules and policies that are in place, what message are we sending to students? Discuss how staff can explain the logic behind the rules so students can better understand them and hopefully to invest in the expectations.
8. It is common for us to avoid difficult conversations out of fear of the potential negative outcome or consequence. What is a professional or personal conversation you've been avoiding and how can you frame it in order to get a better outcome?
9. When we try to better understand the reason behind the behaviors of others, we are more equipped to provide guidance, influence thinking and emotions, and help frame the situations in a way that helps others discover a more positive path forward. What strategies do you use to help students or colleagues find a path forward?
10. Discuss with your table members what your biggest takeaway(s) was from chapter 2? What is one actionable item you plan to implement this school year?

CHAPTER 3

EXPECT EXCELLENCE: Culturizing Student Activities

1. Describe one of your best school experiences when you were a student? What made it so positive? What would it take to create similar experiences that would be a source of joy and pride for each student? What about for each staff member?
2. Casas and Kelly believe that students and staff who feel valued and appreciated are more committed. In what ways do you currently show (not just tell) others that you value their talents, strengths and individuality?
3. On page 70-71, Casas and Kelly illuminate the culture of an athletic program at the University of Iowa. Are there pockets of behaviors by the adults that currently exist in your co-curriculars that upon reflection you think needs to be addressed? What is holding you back? What do we need to do differently to ensure that students are not mistreated, marginalized or demeaned by staff?
4. What type of experience do you want your students to have as part of a co-curricular program? How are we communicating this to students? Have we given them permission to share with the administration if they are not having a positive and respectful experience? How can we make ourselves more available for meaningful feedback?
5. Many of those who pursue coaching may do so because of the influence of a former coach. Every adult who chooses to serve, teach, and mentor students must know why they do what they do. What motivates you to work with students? Does your approach to teaching on the court, pool, field, stage mirror your teaching in the classroom? Are there any areas where you need to make some adjustments? Explain.

CHAPTER 3

EXPECT EXCELLENCE: Culturizing Student Activities

6. At times we must engage in conversations that require us to directly address a consequential truth that we or others are avoiding because it is uncomfortable.

In an effort to be nice or non-confrontational, what consequential truth have you been avoiding? Who needs some feedback from you that you have difficulty delivering? Describe the ways you could give feedback or coach an individual without upsetting the person or straining the relationship.

7. Casas and Kelly discuss how schools must recognize that parents are an integral piece to the success of student opportunities. What steps can teachers, coaches, directors, and sponsors take to mitigate disappointments that invariably surface in the classroom and through school programs while also maximizing the experience for their students and families?
8. Oftentimes we ask for feedback but others are reluctant to give it. When that happens, it could be a signal of a larger trust issue. Reflect on why this happens in school cultures and what are some ways that staff could change their approach to get a more positive result in terms of meaningful feedback.
9. Much of the negativity, harsh feelings, and unnecessary work that is endured in schools and districts alike can be tied back to poor communication. Can you cite areas in your organization where communication could be improved? What suggestions do you have for improved communication that would be more effective and would bring about a more positive result? As a whole staff, identify and come to consensus on five (5) new practices that will serve as collective agreements moving forward to help your staff become more effective communicators.
10. When students decide to quit an activity, program or school how the adults respond reveals a great deal about the culture established. How can we manage these situations when they arise in order to influence students to reconsider and support them during their times of personal struggle?

CHAPTER 4

CARRY THE BANNER: Culturizing School Pride

1. Every organization has the naysayers, the “What about?” and the “We’ve always done it this way” members. How can we manage our own biases and bring these individuals along in a supportive way while simultaneously insulating the positive, innovative, and hopeful ones?
2. Casas and Kelly believe that what we model is what we get. Share three things that you expect from either students, staff or colleagues. Now, ask yourself, “Am I modeling these same expectations?” Do you need to make any adjustments in your own behavior in order to align with your expectations of others?
3. What are the values that currently drive the mission and vision of the school? Respond to the following questions: a. Are there any values that you feel need to be revisited? If so, why? b. Are there others in your school who are not living the core values that were agreed to? c. How does staff currently address or respond to people in the organization who do not live up to the agreed upon core values? d. How do you personally respond to those who remind you when you fall short of living a core value? e. In what ways will you commit to being better and doing better?
4. Casas and Kelly state that every office should be a sanctuary of excellence and that every staff member must see themselves as a Director of 1st Impressions. Discuss via a critical eye the current state of your offices and classrooms. In what ways are we falling short of this level of excellence when it comes to carrying the banner for our students, staff, families and guests?
5. When we can call students and staff members by name (and pronounce them accurately), we validate them and it tells them that we see them, we know them, and we value them. Does every student have a personal connection with at least one adult? What if you put every student’s picture up on the wall? Would there be any students who staff did not know? Does every staff member know every colleagues name in your school? What if you were to line up every staff member in your building including all of the support staff? Would everyone be able to identify by name every teacher, para, cafeteria employee, secretary, guest teacher, custodian etc.?

CHAPTER 4

CARRY THE BANNER: Culturizing School Pride

6. On page 108, Casas and Kelly discuss “shared power.” Describe how you share power with your students in your classroom. How do you share power with students outside the classroom, either in activities or athletics?
7. Guest teachers play an integral role in our daily work with students. Is there clarity and consistent expectations that have been established and communicated to all students regarding their behavior towards guest teachers? How do you prepare your students for a guest teacher? How do you address the behavior issues of those students identified for and by the guest teacher upon your return?
8. There is no better way to carry the banner for your school than proactively teaching students, staff, and families the standard of acceptable behavior at school-sponsored events. What challenges is your school currently facing when it comes to fan behavior, whether it be at an assembly or a musical/athletic event? What strategies can be implemented to improve fan behavior?
9. It should be noted that the vast majority of adults who work with students do so with the utmost commitment to developing their students, athletes, or performers both personally and in their chosen activity. Unfortunately, there are times when the adults in the classroom, on the field or stage, or leaders of the school, use intimidation, fear, coercion, and ridicule to get students to conform to their expectations. What would happen if you asked every student/player/participant to identify one area they feel needs to be addressed in order to improve morale or the overall culture? What things do you think they would identify as needing to be addressed right away and needing to change? Would you be willing to commit to asking every one of your students or players? What is keeping you from doing so?
10. In pages 123-133, Casas and Kelly discuss their thoughts on cultivating an inclusive community for all students. They state that we must be willing to assess students’ experiences in our schools. This requires the adults to ask for student feedback and *really* listen, document responses, and act in order to bring about positive change. When students are invited to candidly share their experience at school, they embrace the opportunity and will do so with grace and respect. Discuss with your colleagues what questions you would pose to students to get a meaningful understanding on where students are at in terms of their pride about their school.

CHAPTER 5

MERCHANT OF HOPE: Culturizing Empathy and Hope

1. Casas and Kelly cite CASEL as defining social-emotional learning (SEL) as “how children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (casel.org). How can staff lean into this effort in order to create a caring, positive, and equitable learning environment that promotes social, emotional, academic, and personal growth for all students and staff?
2. A common phrase that is often shared in education is the need to do what is “best for kids.” However, how has your staff defined what that means? Have a discussion and create a list of what your staff means by what is “best for kids” and come to consensus on how you define this term.
3. Casas and Kelly remind readers that every student and every adult has a story, but if we don’t invest our personal time to try and understand that story, we devalue them. In other words, what we are saying to others is that they are not worth the time. How do you currently invest your time in others (what strategies, activities, etc.) in order to get to know them on a more personal level?
4. Reflect on the situation involving Jack, the student who announced he didn’t prefer mom or dad being called because they were both deceased. What impact did that scenario have on you, your thoughts, feelings, and mindset? How can we refine how we interact with students and how we approach them?
5. Educators throughout the country are exhausted and concerned about what the future holds. The “to do” list grows longer each day so it is imperative to remember how important you are to your school, to your colleagues, your students and most importantly, your family. They need you. Share with others how you take care of your mental and physical health and discuss how we can focus on self-management rather than time-management?

CHAPTER 5

MERCHANT OF HOPE: Culturizing Empathy and Hope

6. Everyone can get weighed down by the challenges that come with our work as educators. If you feel like you are losing your way a bit, reflect on the following questions: What drew you to the profession? Have you maintained the passion, purpose, and pride in your work? If not, what happened? Does your work bring you joy? Do you remember what you told the interview committee on why they should hire you? Share your why with a colleague.
7. Casas and Kelly believe as educators, we lose credibility with students when we have one set of expectations for them but a different set among the adults. Students feel the hypocrisy in what is said compared to what is done. In what ways are the adults in school sending mixed messages to students about what we expect and how we behave?
8. At the heart of every problem is a conversation that needs to be had. What difficult conversations have you been ducking out of fear for the other person's reaction? What message have you withheld for fear of the reaction or retribution? What action have you not taken because it makes you feel uncomfortable? Write down your notes regarding a conversation you have been avoiding and sit down and share your notes with said individual.
9. What inappropriate or ineffective practice have you witnessed or has been reported to you? When we see or hear something that does not align with the values of our school culture, there is an internal siren telling us that the issue must be addressed. When something does not sound right or feel right, it probably isn't and needs to be addressed. Create a step-by-step process for how you plan to have a difficult conversation.
10. To serve as a merchant of hope requires kindness above all. Define what it means to be a good person. Identify one area where you can help a colleague? What is something we can give to others that we have not given them in quite some time? What is one thing you need from others? Generate a list of the kindest things we can do for others and then go do it, unconditionally, with no expectations of receiving anything in return and watch how your life changes.

CHAPTER 6

HANDLE WITH CARE: FINAL REFLECTION

In our own lives, there may be times when we need to be “handled with care” because of personal difficulties and challenges. Imagine, if during times of difficulty or pain, we attached to our students a label marked “Handle with Care.” It would alert everyone we encounter that they should proceed with sensitivity when interacting with these individuals and maybe just maybe, change the trajectory of a child’s life. With your colleagues, identify which students in your school could use such a sticker and then discuss specific strategies that can be implemented as a school starting today in order to be their Merchant of Hope. What if you did the same with staff? How would our approach change regarding how we treated them?