

# CREATING AN AGREEMENT WITHIN

By: Glenn Smith



People have inquired about the article, "Shift Happens" regarding a preference for helping individuals shift their perceptions rather than promoting strategies on how to reward, punish or consequence others' actions. I have often heard people say, "What's wrong with using rewards and punishments? My parents/teachers/coaches/principals rewarded and punished me, and I turned out just fine." My response to them is invariably, "And do you feel they loved or cared about you?" to which the reply is, "Yes." Not discrediting successful experiences, I believe there is value in life lessons occurring among secure, loving or caring relationships that transmit values. However, life cannot guarantee we will all consistently encounter ideal conditions or relationships when we achieve goals, have problems or make mistakes. In addition, people often experience times when rewards, punishments or consequences are irrelevant, superfluous or absent. Who will we be when no one else is around to approve or disapprove? What happens when rewards and punishments do not work? How can we better prepare others and ourselves to evaluate and internalize these moments successfully over time? I suggest another option, *that of creating an agreement within.*

I believe that when relying on rewards and penalties to motivate or coerce someone to sustain, change or stop what they are doing, we are diverting the attention of children and adults to look more outside of themselves for approval rather than inside at their own developing sense of personal values. Agreements move the emphasis away from what happens to me if I do or do not do something or what I will receive or not receive, towards the person I am becoming with each decision I make.

I have worked with children as young as three years old that began this process of making agreements with self and others. Reading over these documents, I think back to these young children telling me they wanted to be kind, sharing, a good friend and helpful . I have heard adolescents say that they want to be successful, respectful, a team player, and independent. In the 15 years I have taught in the Mecklenburg County Jail in Charlotte, NC, the men and women have created numerous of personal and classroom agreements that have declared over a hundred diverse principles that they wanted to demonstrated in their daily lives. Remarkably, with over two hundred classes taught, there have been no two classroom agreements that have been identical although being respectful and being open have emerged every time.

I have found that once these agreements are made, I am in a extraordinary position to lead instead of coerce. I can now ask the question: "Who do you want me — as your counselor, teacher, mentor, coach, friend, supervisor, parent, or from whatever role I am functioning — to be when you are not living up to whom you have agreed with yourself and others to be?" I can also help them ask the same question to themselves. "Who do I want to be with myself when I fall short of my agreements?"

I have found that rewards and penalties are not necessary. These agreements with self and others facilitate accountability and help us, and those we care about to be the people we all aspire to be in any situation.

Glenn