

Vanishing options test

The scenario: You've been struggling with little Johnny. He was sweet all last semester, but has been acting a fool in your class lately. At first he was a few minutes late to class, and he didn't apologize like he normally did. Then he missed two homework assignments. After that he became openly defiant. You told the class to turn to page 55. Most did, except Johnny. You said, "Alright class - everyone should please be on page 55 now." Johnny sat still. "Johnny: Turn to page 55." "I'm not doing it, and I don't care what you do about it. Fail me if you want - this class is stupid anyways." Finally, today you happen to turn the corner back to your classroom after lunch and you see Johnny sneaking out of your classroom as you approach. "Johnny what are you doing - you know you're not supposed to be in my classroom when no one else is there." In his hand, you see the nice beautiful stapler your brother bought you for the winter holidays. You bring Johnny to the principal's office and debrief the situation. Your principal tells you, "I know you've really been trying with this kid, so I'll trust your discretion here. Do you want me to give him a week's detention, or do you want to let it slide?"

Now, there are a lot of different aspects of this scenario that can provide illuminating lessons in decision-making. But today, I want to use that scenario to introduce the "vanishing options" test.

Why is the vanishing options test necessary... The test, which was coined by Chip and Dan Heath, is used to counter two big problems in decision-making:

(1) First, too often we limit our choices to two. Did you catch that above? Week's detention or letting it slide appear to be the only two choices. We need a strategy to consider other alternatives.

(2) Second, too often after we make a decision, we're ready to move on. Sometimes, that's a good thing. Could you imagine every time a kid asked if they could use the restroom if we spent three days deliberating the decision? We just face way too many choice points in our work, and can't possibly analyze them all thoroughly. That said, there are a few instances in which we should force ourselves to pause, and that can be difficult for us.

To counter these two problems, use the vanishing options test. With this mental thought experiment, remove both of your identified options. In this case, for example, think this: "Okay, if we couldn't give the kid a week's detention, and if we couldn't let it slide, *then what would we do?*" Maybe you'd consider a different type of punishment (for instance, having Johnny write "I will not steal" 1,000 times). Or maybe you'd consider rewards instead (for instance, after a week of positive behavior, Johnny can get a special treat from the cafeteria). Or maybe, you'd think of other ideas altogether. For example, you might realize, "Oh perhaps something happened to Johnny over winter break, and I need to spend some quality time with him to figure out what it is so we can redirect his behavior back to the positive way it used to be."

Obviously, in the real world, you *do* have your original two options. So after your thought experiment, if you decide you'd still like to issue a detention, or if you decide you'd still like to let it slide, then

great! In fact, the vanishing options test is helpful even in these instances, *because it can provide you with certainty*. But often, forcing yourself to consider other possibilities will yield just that.

So give that test a shot this week, and let me know how it goes!

Bad decision of the week: Teacher grabbed and threatened a third grader because he rolled his eyes

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