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In 1990, Elder Boyd K. Packer reminded teachers to learn from correction offered in a spirit of love.

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Counsel and Correction

Paul V. Johnson

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It is a marvelous privilege to be with you today. Because of technology, we are able to gather in many places in the world. We are from different backgrounds and cultures. We speak different languages and live in different countries, but we are all united in a great common cause—helping the youth and young adults of the Church learn the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have about two thousand full-time employees worldwide focused on seminaries and institutes of religion. It is a large organization, but compared with the numbers of young people in the kingdom, it is a relatively small number. Compared with the total population of the earth of over six billion, we are a very small group indeed. And yet this small group can make a great difference in the lives of the young people we work with. In fact, if we accomplish what we have been asked, our work will impact much more than just the young people we work with today. Because of the rising generation's opportunities and destiny, your influence will have an effect on the entire world. These young people will be prepared for their future, and it is exciting to be participants in that preparation.

I would like to mention three important things that will help us be even better as we go forward in our work: first, a continued focus on the current teaching emphasis; second, personal accountability for our assignments and our individual growth; and third, a willingness to receive help and correction.

Focus on the Current Teaching Emphasis

I have had the chance to meet with some of you since the introduction of our teaching emphasis last year. It is apparent that you have put a lot of effort into making changes in your teaching to reflect the direction of this emphasis. We can see some of the fruits of this emphasis during a year of teaching, but the greatest blessings will be seen further in the future when our students are in the mission field or have their own families and are grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We sincerely hope you will continue to put forth efforts in this area. It may require further changes in how you teach. We also hope you are willing to share ideas with us that have made a difference in your classroom. We have created an authorized means whereby good ideas can be shared with fellow teachers in the Church Educational System. Would you please send good ideas to us? You can e-mail them to our Training Services Division at ideas@ldscs.org or through our Web site at ldscs.org.

Personal Accountability

The doctrines of the gospel are straightforward on accountability. Because we have both agency and a knowledge of good and evil, we are personally accountable for our choices and will be judged according to the choices we make, including our words, our works, and our thoughts (see Alma 12:14).

In our employment we are also accountable for the choices we make regarding our particular assignments. If we can each sense this accountability, we will be more focused on finding ways to accomplish what we have been asked to accomplish. We will also be more willing to make the personal changes needed to be more effective in our particular assignment. We will also be more open to suggestions and correction.

Willingness to Receive Help and Correction

I would like to discuss willingness to receive help and correction. Elder Boyd K. Packer taught some powerful principles on this topic in a talk he gave in 1990 entitled “The Edge of the Light.” Look for these principles as he tells an experience he had as a young married man with the patriarch of his stake:

Shortly after we were married, I was invited to speak in a sacrament meeting. Patriarch [S. Norman] Lee was seated on the stand. As the meeting closed he said to me, “That was a fine talk, Brother Packer, but

may I point out that the correct pronunciation of this one word is as follows . . .” to which I replied with some impudence, “Oh, is that so?”

Later I felt very ashamed of myself and called Patriarch Lee and apologized. I thanked him for the correction and invited his continued interest. . . .

Shortly thereafter I was called to the stake high council and on fairly frequent occasions spoke in meetings where Patriarch Lee was in attendance. Always he would compliment me and then add a correction or a suggestion. Always I tried to respond with sufficient appreciation to encourage him to continue his interest.

A desire to learn is one thing. An expressed willingness to be taught and to be corrected is quite another. I have found . . . that there is always a “Patriarch Lee-type”—usually someone older and experienced who knows much about the challenges you face. . . . It is worth inviting them to help you.

Elder Packer continues:

While there is great value in seeking a personal interview to receive counsel, what I am talking about is something else. It is an unstructured process, with counsel and suggestions offered in bits and pieces and you responding with thanks. That process survives only where there is a genuine desire to learn and an invitation to those who can teach and correct you.

That invitation is not always in words but more in attitude. . . .

Once when I returned from a mission tour totally exhausted, my wife said to me, “I have never seen you so tired. What is the matter; did you find a mission president who wouldn’t listen?” “No,” I replied, “it was just the opposite. I found one who wanted to learn.” Many will say they want to learn but feel threatened if there is the slightest element of correction in what they are given. He wanted to learn! That president now sits in the Council of the Twelve Apostles.

I have learned that few respond when that kind of teaching or correction is offered and fewer still invite it. If you are willing, a teacher will spread a cloth and share nourishing morsels from his store of experience.¹

Elder Packer mentioned that “many will say they want to learn but feel threatened if there is the slightest element of correction in what they are given.” Why does this seem to be a natural tendency? It may be because of our own personal pride and ego. It is an irony that we want to be viewed by others as competent and even flawless but can be resistant to suggestions that would help us get closer to that ideal. It’s almost as if we are willing to trade long-term growth for short-term appearances.

I had an experience involving two employees who I felt needed to correct something that had to do with their employment. It was the same issue with both employees, but their responses were very different. I talked with each employee. The first was somewhat defensive and tried to push the blame to others in an attempt to relieve himself of accountability for his actions. He seemed more interested in rationalizing than listening. There was also some sulking afterward and for a while a little strain in our relationship.

The other employee reacted differently. His first expression was an apology that he had put me in a spot where I had to come to him and correct him. He said that he should have made the change before it got to that point and that he would try to not put me in that uncomfortable situation again. He meant what he said. He immediately accepted the counsel and made the changes. Our relationship was strengthened, and I have always felt the door was open with him for very open communication.

Remember Elder Packer explained that he was talking about an unstructured process that survives only when there is a genuine desire to learn. It is also triggered by attitude as much as anything else. We can actually shut the process down if we become defensive or start to murmur or ignore the counsel we receive. I have had the privilege of receiving correction and suggestions from several General Authorities. I know I need to be careful not to close the door for them to give further feedback by becoming defensive or not listening to what they are trying to tell me.

Allow me to read an experience one of our employees had with his area director. Notice how he responds to his area director and the difference it makes in his own teaching and in his life:

I entered my CES career with high expectations. . . . My greatest hope was that I would be an influence in the lives of students and bring people closer to the Lord. I had a talent for teaching. I also had a great love for the youth. However, as my career began, I was not having the effect that I had hoped for. . . .

As my career entered its fifth year, I felt satisfied. I had become good at getting by. I believed that as long as I tried and did my best the Lord would work out the details in my students' lives. At this point, I had been given very little feedback as to how I was doing. Most of my discussions with other teachers led to the conclusion that "we all need to hang in there and do the best we can."

Then a new area director was assigned. He brought a new and different direction. When he first visited my class, instead of patting me

on the back and saying thanks for all you do, he made the comment, “You are a good teacher, but you are not a great one; with a few simple changes you could become a great one.” I was stunned. Since preservice, I had not been given any direct feedback or instruction on how I could improve my teaching. I could have been offended; however, I was intrigued by what he meant by the statement that I could become a great teacher.

My area director and I talked. He explained to me the areas . . . where I could improve. He visited my classroom often, and each time I would take his counsel and try my best to apply it.

I am so grateful for an area director who took the time to make gentle, yet bold comments about how I could improve my teaching. . . . I am grateful for that day five years ago when [he] visited my class for the first time and set my career on a different course and changed the impact I was having in the lives of my students.

Did you notice his reaction to the correction he received? Think of what progress we each could make with that type of attitude and commitment.

In his last conference address, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught us to “be grateful for people in your lives who love you enough to correct you, to remind you of your standards and possibilities, even when you don’t want to be reminded.

“A dear and now deceased friend said to me years ago when I had said something sardonic, ‘You could have gone all day without saying that.’ His one-liner reproof was lovingly stated, illustrating how correction can be an act of affection.”²²

I have a three-year-old grandson named James. My daughter had been teaching him to be careful about strangers. She was quizzing him to see how well he had listened to her and asked him, “James, would you ever get into a car with a stranger?” He answered, “No.” She continued, “What if the stranger said he would give you candy? Then would you go with him?” James thought for a minute and finally said, “I’m not telling.” My daughter became a little alarmed and said, “James, you never go with a stranger even if he has candy. It is very dangerous!” James then said, “Don’t talk to me, Mommy!” Sometimes we can be a little like James when we are given correction and we just don’t want to hear it.

We can each do better in this particular area in our lives. We can be more open and less defensive. We can make it easy for others to give us suggestions and be truly grateful for the help. It is not a sign of weakness or incompetence. In fact, defensiveness and unwillingness to take correction or even chastisement is a sign of weakness.

We will be blessed by being open to counsel from our leaders and others around us. If we are willing and invite help, that counsel will come. The *Administering Appropriately* handbook states: “Seeking help from others and reporting to leaders are essential in personal development. . . . Leaders and teachers should . . . take initiative in seeking help by pursuing counsel, training, and feedback.”³

Most importantly, we each have access to a powerful source of correction and counsel—the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost works on some of the same principles we have discussed. The Savior taught, “The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance” (John 14:26).

If we are defensive and ignore promptings from the Spirit, we become less able to receive further counsel. If we are open and willing to change and follow the Spirit, we become more familiar with the whisperings and can have the Spirit as a constant companion.

Elder Maxwell said: “As the Lord communicates with the meek and submissive, fewer decibels are required, and more nuances are received. Even the most meek, like Moses, learn overwhelming things they ‘never had supposed.’ But it is only the meek mind which can be so shown and so stretched—not those, as Isaiah wrote, who ‘are wise in their own eyes.’”⁴

Appreciation

At the beginning, I mentioned the great privilege it is to work with the rising generation. I feel that very strongly. I know you feel it too. I have sensed that as I have visited you and watched you interact with these great young people. We can help make a difference if we are willing. The Lord expects us to. I think you have felt the same feelings as the Brethren have addressed us. They know we have to be more effective in our assignments, and they expect us to be.

I am very thankful for you. I want to express my appreciation to the spouses of our employees. Your support and help is so important. I know this in a very personal way. I am so grateful for my wife, Jill. I wish you could get to know her better. I wish we could get to know each of you better. We pray for you and your families.

I know that God lives. I also know that Jesus Christ is His divine Son. I know that He carried out the Atonement and is a resurrected being. I testify of that Atonement. There may be no more powerful influence in the life of a young person than the sure knowledge that Christ has atoned for his or her sins. This can help them weather any

storms of temptation or persecution they may face. The fulness of the gospel has been restored to the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I know we have a prophet of God at the head of the Church today—President Gordon B. Hinckley. I love you and pray the Lord’s blessings will be with you. **RE**

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, in *BYU Today*, March 1991, 24.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Remember How Merciful the Lord Hath Been,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 44.
3. *Administering Appropriately: A Handbook for CES Leaders and Teachers* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 16.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1985, 90; or *Ensign*, May 1985, 71.