

The Four Agreements for Independent Voice Teachers

By Cynthia Vaughn, *Inter Nos* Associate Editor

If you spend any amount of time on voice teacher forums and online discussion groups, you will quickly discover that this is a common place for teachers to vent and let off steam. Stories of injustices and lack of respect usually fall into one of three categories:

- 1) Bad behavior by parents
- 2) Bad behavior by students
- 3) Bad behavior by colleagues

Complaints about parents lead the pack. There are complaints about parents who micromanage lessons, parents who pay late or don't pay, parents who expect the voice teacher to juggle his/her schedule around the student's other activities, parents who blame the teacher when the student doesn't get the lead in the school musical. The list is endless. Students often forget their music, and don't practice, and don't show up for recitals. Other teachers and choral directors sometimes undermine the teacher's technique and repertoire choices.

Voice teacher forums are typically hidden groups, only accessible with permission by moderators, which gives teachers a false sense of security that the comments will never get back to the perpetrator of the voice lesson crime. Current politics and media scandals should be a timely reminder that nothing on the internet is truly private. Someone always knows someone who knows someone who knows someone.....

But I digress, back to the bad behavior. We've all been there and have had clients who don't really seem to respect our training and profession. When that person disrespects you in your own living room, that can be a bit much to take. I have definitely had to take a breath and count to ten before escalating a disagreement where I was clearly in the right. ("Oh, your son didn't know about the recital date? I told you, and gave you a handout, and emailed it, and announced it on the website and studio Facebook page.") Over the years, however, I've become more patient and less reactive in

dealing with difficult clients. I'm not afraid to let a student go if



they (or their family) bring more drama and negative energy into the studio than they are worth. There are other students who will respect me and value what I have to teach.

I remind myself often of Don Miguel Ruiz popular axioms known as

The Four Agreements

1. Be Impeccable with your Word
2. Don't take Anything Personally
3. Don't Make Assumptions
4. Always Do Your Best

To be impeccable with your word means not only to tell the truth, but to regard the power that words have to hurt or help. It may feel really good to write, "Can you believe how they treated me?" followed by dozens of supportive "Yeah"s and "You don't have to take that"s. However, as the comments stack up, so does

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the negative energy, which only affects the readers or OP (original poster.) The culprit never reads the accusation. In fact, the OP is counting on the fact that in a private forum, the miscreant will never see the post. Consider, then, how you share a story. Is there a way to share the incident with some positive action that you took to make sure it doesn't happen again. Maybe. That might actually help another teacher who has a similar situation in the future.

Don't take anything personally. That has been a life-saver! I can't control how someone else acts, but I can often control my reaction to that person. If someone has had a really bad day (or they are just a difficult person) and they are taking it out on me, that doesn't mean that I am a bad teacher or a bad person. I used to be a serial apologizer, but sometimes I'm not sorry. It's not you, it's me. Oh, wait, it really is you.

It's so easy to make **assumptions** about why someone does something, but it's not helpful to imagine all of the possible scenarios. It may be best to just ask what is going on. The "lazy" student who didn't memorize her NATS solo and forgot her books may be dealing

with her parents' divorce or a break-up with her boyfriend. Ruiz recommends, "Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama..."

Always do your best. And recognize that your best is a moving line. Somedays I'm on fire and I feel like Super Teacher. Other days, I'm sure I have imposter syndrome and all of my favorite techniques and tricks just aren't working for that student. Do the best you can and maybe you'll see it with fresh eyes (and ears) at the next lesson. Instead of beating yourself up (or blaming the student), give it some time and see #2.

It is part of our job to educate parents, students, and colleagues in business etiquette and the expectations that we have for our own studios. We can model professionalism and courtesy in the studio and online, and hope that it will be returned. If it's not, see #2.

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