

Card Draws

A Micro-Inclusion That Turns Accountability Into Belonging

Introduction: A Lesson I Learned the Hard Way

I went chest to chest with a student once.

I was a young teacher fresh out of university and a former football player. I didn't know much about adolescent brains flooded with adrenaline, and I certainly didn't understand de-escalation. At the time, I viewed backing down as a sign of weakness. My solution to poor behaviour was what I jokingly call the New York City Transit Rule: *might makes right*.

Because it was the 1990s, very few teachers worried about being stabbed or shot by a student. Most of the time, when I raised my voice, students backed down. On this occasion, however, one didn't.

I matched his volume with a louder one. When that wasn't enough, I stepped into his personal space. He responded by stepping closer and bumping me like an angry baseball manager arguing with an umpire. As I regained my footing and prepared to move back toward him, another student stepped between us.

The offending student overturned two desks, kicked open the classroom door, and stormed down the hallway. I stood there breathless, angry, and feeling victimized.

How dare he.

I knew these confrontations happened to other teachers, but this was me! Thank goodness cell phones weren't around then. His offence?

He was late.

Looking back, I'm embarrassed by how I handled that situation. What troubles me even more is that it wasn't unusual. My memories of high school in the 1980s and my early years of teaching in the 1990s are filled with examples of adults using intimidation, public embarrassment, and sheer force to maintain control. Football wasn't much different. Grabbing face-masks, shouting inches from a player's face, and the occasional kick in the backside were simply accepted as coaching.

Whether those methods ever truly worked is debatable, but they certainly don't work today.

As my career progressed, I noticed something interesting. In the classroom, discipline problems decreased as my lessons became more engaging. On the football field, the less I made coaching about me, the more responsive players became. Eventually, I found myself asking a different question:

Can we hold young people accountable without damaging their dignity?

I believe we can.

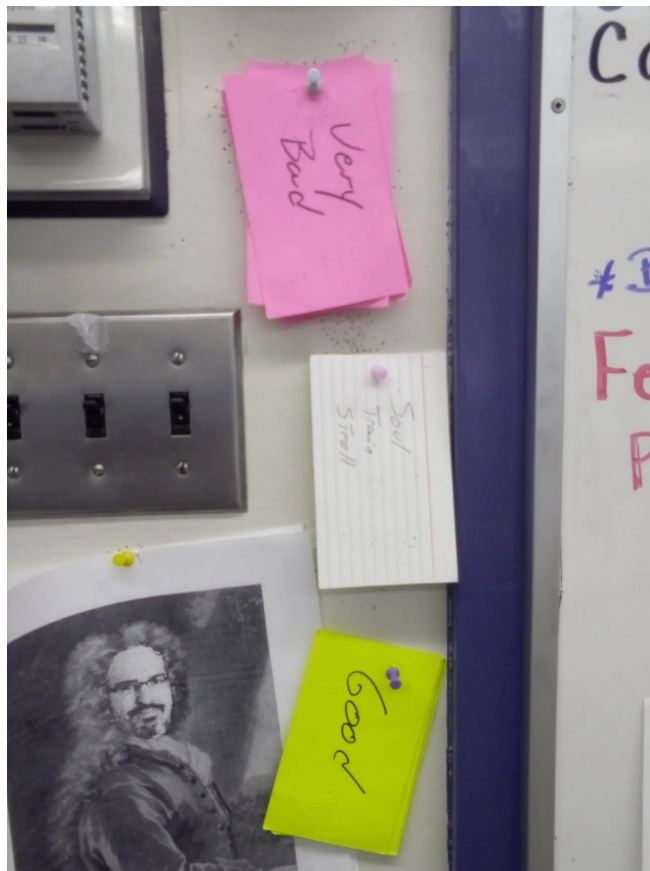
Card Draws became one of the first practical answers to that question.

The Problem with Traditional Discipline

Many discipline systems unintentionally create a conflict that is difficult to recover from. Students become embarrassed, teachers become frustrated, and the rest of the class quietly watches the relationship deteriorate. Even when the teacher "wins," something valuable has often been lost.

Over time, I realized that accountability and dignity don't have to compete with one another. In the right environment, they can reinforce each other. Card Draws became one of the simplest ways I found to preserve accountability while strengthening relationships. More surprisingly, they also strengthened the culture of the entire class

What Are Card Draws?



Card Draws were introduced to me years ago by Coach Hugh Wyatt from Washington State, and over the years they've become one of my favourite examples of a Micro-Inclusion. They're simple to implement, memorable for students, and surprisingly effective at changing the emotional tone of accountability. Best of all, they are one example of a larger culture-building framework rather than simply a disciplinary strategy.

The concept is straightforward.

When a student or player commits a **minor** infraction—arriving late, forgetting equipment, or another small transgression—they're given a choice. They can accept the standard consequence you've already established, or they can choose to take a Card Draw.

The Card Draw deck consists of five index cards. Four contain light-hearted consequences, and one is a **Get Out of Jail Free** card.

Before the student chooses, they understand and accept that whatever card they draw is the consequence they will receive.

That small element of choice changes everything.

Instead of feeling that a punishment has been imposed on them, students willingly participate in the process. They aren't arguing with the teacher or negotiating a consequence. They're accepting the outcome of a game they chose to play.

One of the things I love most about Card Draws is that they introduce hope into a disciplinary interaction. As students look at the cards, you can actually watch the anticipation build. They're hoping to find the Get Out of Jail Free card, and for a brief moment the entire interaction shifts from confrontation to curiosity. It doesn't eliminate accountability. It changes the emotional temperature of accountability.

Before You Begin

Before you introduce Card Draws to your classroom or team, there's one important point I want to make.

Card Draws do not create culture. They simply amplify the culture that already exists.

They reveal and reinforce the culture you've already begun to build.

If students don't trust you, this strategy won't fix that. If your expectations are inconsistent or your relationships are weak, Card Draws will feel forced rather than fun.

Like every Micro-Inclusion, this strategy rests on a foundation of respect.

Students need to know that you care about them before they'll laugh with you. Otherwise, they'll assume you're laughing at them.

For that reason, I always waited until I had established relationships, communicated clear expectations, and created an environment where students understood that accountability wasn't personal—it was simply part of belonging to a team or classroom.

It's also important to recognize that Card Draws aren't appropriate for every situation.

I reserved them for what I call "**kids being kids.**"

Showing up late.

Forgetting equipment.

Talking out of turn.

Minor disruptions.

Those are the kinds of behaviours that fit naturally into this system.

Serious issues such as bullying, harassment, fighting, or anything affecting student safety required a different response. Those situations deserve direct intervention and should never be turned into entertainment.

One final piece of advice.

Don't introduce Card Draws as a punishment system.

Introduce them as **part of your classroom culture.**

When students understand that everyone—including you—is committed to creating a positive environment, the Card Draw becomes less about consequences and more about maintaining the standards that make the classroom enjoyable for everyone.

Every Student Has a Role

Over the years I discovered that the Card Draw itself wasn't the most important part. The introduction was. Rather than simply shuffling the cards myself, I started involving the rest of the class. Before presenting the cards, I would ask the student drawing:

"Who would you like to supervise the shuffle?"

Once they chose someone, I'd walk over to that student, shuffle the cards in front of them, and announce to the class:

"Today's shuffling is being independently monitored by the accounting firm of Smith, Smith & Smith."

Yes, I always repeated the last name three times. The class expected it. Then I'd ask our newly appointed accountant to choose someone else. That person became responsible for the sound effects. I would explain:

"When I present these cards, you're going to provide the sound effects. You get to decide how dramatic this moment becomes."

Then I'd offer three choices.

Would you like me to present the cards like:

- ballroom dancing in *Downton Abbey*?
- wildlife on the Serengeti?
- or a traditional Batutsi welcome?

The class always had an opinion. By the time I finally finished ballroom dancing, bounding like a gazelle or pretending I was Batman, and approached the student with the cards, everyone was smiling. The sound-effects student would inevitably contribute something completely ridiculous—a drumroll, a superhero sound, a raspberry, or an enthusiastic "Shazam!"

At first glance, this may seem unnecessary. Some teachers may decide it doesn't fit their personality. That's perfectly fine. The important point isn't the comedy. The important point is that the class has become part of the process.

Without realizing it, you've transformed what could have been a private confrontation into a shared experience. Instead of watching someone be punished, students are participating in a culture that says, *"We all make mistakes, we can laugh together, and we can move on together."*

That shift—from discipline as confrontation to discipline as community—is one of the reasons Card Draws have remained part of my classroom and football programs for so many years

Here is a view of the Downton Abbey approach on the football field:



Card Draws in Practice

One of the reasons Card Draws have lasted so long in both my classroom and on the football field is that they're incredibly easy to adapt. The principle never changes. Only the consequences do.

The consequences should always be:

- light-hearted
- slightly inconvenient
- memorable
- respectful

The goal is never embarrassment.

The goal is shared laughter followed by shared accountability.

If a consequence leaves a student feeling humiliated, you've missed the point.

If it leaves the class smiling while the student smiles too, you're probably on the right track.

Classroom Card Draws

In my classroom, our "Bad Cards" were used for students who arrived late or committed another minor classroom infraction.

The deck included five cards:

Accordion of Shame

The student straps on an accordion, has their picture taken, and earns a place on our Wall of Shame. (I do give the student permission to play the accordion after the photo is taken. Rarely do they decline).



With the right culture, even the most reluctant students will laugh at themselves.

Pig Puppet Song

The student comes to the front of the room, puts a pig puppet on one hand, and sings a short song to the class.

Soul Train Stroll

The class lines the hallway while the student dances between two rows of cheering classmates before re-entering the classroom.

This eventually became so popular that neighbouring classrooms occasionally joined us when they heard it was happening.

Classroom Dance Party

Instead of the student doing anything, the rest of the class stands and dances to *Smooth Criminal* for thirty seconds while the student watches.

Get Out of Jail Free

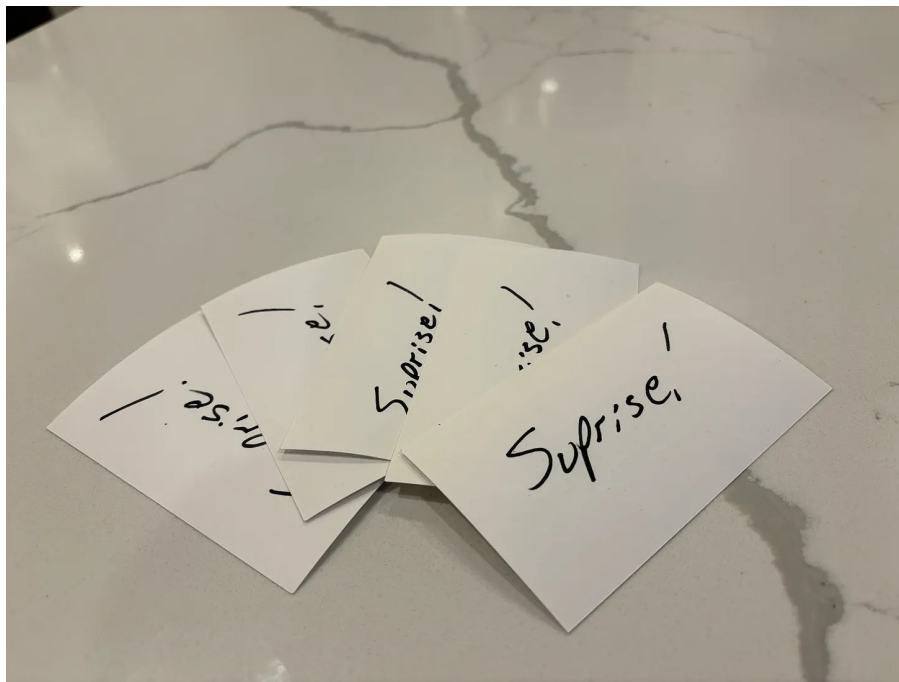
No consequence at all.

The student returns to class.

At first glance these activities appear silly. That's intentional. Humour changes the emotional tone of accountability.

Instead of creating a confrontation, you've created a story students will remember long after they've forgotten why the Card Draw happened in the first place.

Football Card Draws



On the football field, we use the same concept, but we call them **Surprise Cards**.

The name comes from one simple expectation.

Coaches should never be surprised.

If a player is going to be late, forget equipment, miss practice, or need to leave early, we expect to know before practice begins—not thirty seconds before the first whistle.

When that happens, we jokingly refer to it as a **surprise**, and the player is given a choice.

They can run three laps after practice.

Or...

They can take a Surprise Card.

The deck is almost identical to the classroom version. Four cards contain consequences, and one is a **Get Out of Jail Free** card.

Our current deck includes:

40-Yard Pencil Roll

The player lies flat on the ground and rolls forty yards across the field.

It sounds easy. It isn't.

One player once informed me, quite dramatically, that he wasn't sure he'd ever have children after completing it.

I'm pleased to report he recovered.

Five-and-Turns

The player starts in a football stance, sprints five yards, turns around, returns to the start, gets back into a stance, and repeats the process.

Simple. Fast. Tiring.

Three Sabre Makers

Formerly called Man Makers, this drill consists of sprinting five yards and back, ten yards and back, fifteen yards and back, and finally twenty yards and back.

It's just enough work to remind players that forgetting their equipment wasn't worth it.

Bee Hive Run

This is everyone's favourite. Or perhaps everyone's least favourite.

The entire team clumps together shoulder to shoulder like a swarm of bees and jogs a lap around the field. No one is allowed to separate from the group.

The player who drew the card stands and watches as the rest of the team runs together.

Get Out of Jail Free

No consequence.

The player walks away smiling while everyone else groans in mock disappointment.

The Hidden Lesson

At first glance, Surprise Cards appear to be a way of making discipline more enjoyable.

I don't think that's what they're doing at all. The real lesson has very little to do with the player who drew the card. It's about everyone else standing around watching. Every time the cards come out, something fascinating happens. Players stop what they're doing and gather around.

They lean in.

They laugh.

They debate which card they hope will be chosen.

Then comes the moment everyone is waiting for.

If the player draws a punishment card, the team erupts in cheers.

If they draw the **Get Out of Jail Free** card, forty teenage boys collectively groan as though a referee has just overturned the winning touchdown.

They aren't angry.

They're invested.

Recently, something even more interesting began to happen.

When we added the Bee Hive Run to the deck, the coaching staff started cheering too. Think about that for a moment.

The coaches—the people responsible for enforcing discipline—were celebrating the possibility that they would have to stop practice and run with the team.

Suddenly, discipline wasn't happening **to** the players.

It was happening **with** them.

The same thing eventually happened in my classroom.

When students drew the **Classroom Dance Party** card, the rest of the class stood up and danced while the student remained seated.

The consequence became shared. The accountability belonged to the entire group. Those moments taught something much more important than the original rule.

They taught that this was a community. Communities celebrate together. Communities accept responsibility together.

And occasionally, communities are willing to accept a small inconvenience together because one of their members made a mistake.

That's why I don't think of Card Draws as a discipline strategy. I think of them as a culture strategy disguised as a discipline strategy. The student who forgot their helmet eventually forgets the consequence. What they remember is forty teammates laughing together while running beside them.

That's an example of a culture building framework rather than just a discipline strategy.

And culture, almost always, is remembered far longer than punishment.

A Note About the Videos

The two videos included with this guide illustrate this idea far better than words ever could. In this scenario a Grade 9 player just drew the Bee Hive Run card for leaving his helmet on the field the night before. Normally this would be a situation where the upperclassmen would be furious with him. However as you watch the card draw play out watch the faces of the players and coaches.

Look at the smiles.

Listen to the laughter.

Notice how willingly people participate and put their equipment back on despite the fact that they have just finished a gruelling practice.

That's the real lesson.

The consequence lasts thirty seconds.

The culture it reinforces lasts much longer.



Card Draws are just one example of what I call a Micro-Inclusion—small, intentional actions that build belonging without creating another initiative. Whether I'm working with schools, sports organizations, or leadership teams, my goal is always the same: to help leaders create cultures where people want to belong.

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