

Parenting like a Good Manager



While there are enormous differences between the role of a boss or manager of employees, and that of a parent or ‘manager’ of one’s children (or at least some of their behavior), I believe that a comparison of these roles can be useful in thinking about the most effective ‘style’ or ‘approach’ to parenting adolescent children. It is important to note that adolescents *do* require a different approach than that taken with younger children. Due to their growing maturity, reasoning ability, and decision-making capacity, they are able to assume greater personal autonomy and responsibility

for their choices and actions. If parents let their teens increasingly take on these challenges, and if they succeed, they will gain greater confidence in themselves and their abilities, which is an important component of self-esteem and future success in life. However, if parents are too restrictive or easily frustrated, then their teen may themselves become frustrated and demoralized, or they may decide to challenge the parent’s authoritative position on the basis of it being unfair or excessively punitive. Alternatively, if parents are too passive and overly permissive in their parenting approach, and if they allow their teen to engage in any kind of behavior without limits or consequences for poor choices, then their teen may never learn to take personal responsibility for their actions or consider their effect on others. In short, there needs to be a balance in approach, and I will suggest that we can learn something about that balance by looking at the role of the ideal boss or manager.

Before describing what it is to be a good manager, let’s talk about what makes a ‘bad’ boss or manager. Bad managers are often poor communicators, disorganized, inconsistent in expressing their demands or needs, and are difficult to make sense of. In these situations, employees can become frustrated or demoralized, and may eventually stop taking them seriously or just start telling them what they think they want to hear. This is a bad situation since the manager has likely lost all ability to have a positive influence on their employees. In addition, some managers can be excessively passive – letting their employees get away with near anything or backing down when there is sign of conflict. Others may be quick-tempered, and react to difficult situations with explosive anger. Of course, none of these approaches are good.

Here are some qualities of a good manager (and I think qualities of a good parenting approach):

- Good communication skills (verbal and nonverbal); no mixed or inconsistent signals
- Clear about expectations and provides expectations well in advance so that the employee can act on them; does not ‘make up’ or ‘re-write’ the rules on the spot or after the fact.
- Good listening skills; sympathetic and understanding when appropriate
- Receptive to increasing feedback, depending on employee status, maturity, skill, or ability

- Able to appreciate differences in opinion without necessarily backing down, but also not afraid to change their approach if it makes sense to; there is no fear of being undermined or need to 'save face.'
- Confident in their position when they have reason to; does not allow themselves to be passive; when defending a position or asserting a boundary, does so in a calm, firm, and neutral tone of voice.
- Does not easily react with anger, hostility, or personal attacks. When there is a need for reprimand or punishment, lets the consequences speak for themselves (e.g. week without pay, loss of bonus, etc.).

The Passive and Aggressive Styles of Parenting

The passive parent is the parent who lacks confidence, who frequently second-guesses themselves, and who does not know how to react when their teen questions their parenting or outright refuses to take them seriously. It is important to note that children, teens, and even adults, will tend to 'take the path of least resistance.' This means that if you do not assert yourself or your expectations when you need to, people will take advantage of that (even if they do not mean to), and will act in ways that may not communicate respect or fair consideration. If, in our role as parents, we do not hold teens accountable for their actions, they will not learn how to take responsibility for their lives, which will cause them to struggle later in life – perhaps most especially in later academic and work environments.

The passive parent will often believe that they have lost all sense of control or power to influence their teen – they feel helpless and almost hostage to a situation that seems impossible to reconcile. A parent may ask, for example, "What do I do when my teen is extremely disrespectful, breaks curfew, or refuses to come home when he/she is supposed to?" While not all situations are the same, the first question to be asked is: "We'll, what happens next?" What would a good manager do in a situation where an employee is being disrespectful to his boss or shows up intoxicated or late for work? They would probably tell them, in a neutral but firm voice, that their behavior is unacceptable, is against company policy and guidelines, and that there is a consequence of one week without pay or that they are losing their chance of promotion for 6 months. If it happens again, they will likely lose their job.

Of course, a parent cannot exactly 'fire' or sever ties with their children, but it needs to be asked: "does your teen still have access to privileges that they should not have access to given their behavior?" I often hear parents say "we've tried everything!" and even "we tried that approach and it didn't work!" only to find that there is something about their teen's behavior that is in fact 'working for them' – they still have access to their cell-phone, their parents still drive them places, they still get allowance, have access to the internet, get to stay home from school without much consequence, and so on. Parent's need to take inventory of the many privileges they afford their child and let the consequences speak for themselves – this is how it works in the adult working world and if we expect teens to eventually adapt to that world, we should prepare them for it through our style of parenting. While this approach is not a fix to every kind of problem, it is a starting point. And if parents have a hard time implementing it or sticking to it, they should speak to a competent clinician who can help them navigate through any roadblocks or figure out what else might be going on.

I should also mention the other end of the parenting continuum – the 'aggressive' parenting style. This kind of parent will usually react to their teen's behavior with anger, and say things like: "my teen pushes every single one of my buttons!" There are a few points that are important to consider when using an aggressive

or authoritarian approach to parenting. Firstly, unnecessary or excessive use of anger or aggression can often have the effect of shaming your child and making them feel bad about themselves, which can make it extremely difficult for them to feel like they can admit when they are wrong – this is why many kids get caught up in patterns of lying (to avoid guilt and shame). Secondly, anger begets anger – plenty of research shows that aggressive parenting styles only teach children and teens that anger is an effective way to get what you want. Lastly, anger implies that the parent fears they have something to lose – usually their feeling that they have lost control over a situation. On the contrary, the self-assured and confident parent does not fear losing control because they *know* that they are the parent in the situation; they do not allow themselves to get angry or upset: “my child/teen cannot ever push my buttons, because they are *my* buttons – I determine when they will be pushed, since I am the responsible parent in this situation.”

Finding Balance in Style

Unlike the passive or aggressive styles of parenting, the parenting approach that I am suggesting here communicates trust, through allowing your teen to take on greater challenges appropriate to their developmental age and abilities, and respect, by no longer treating them as children and allowing them a chance to voice their own opinions and concerns and to try out their developing reasoning abilities without feeling that one’s parenting role is being threatened. Remember that with greater freedom comes responsibility – and parents have an obligation to hold their teens accountable for their actions. In these situations, it is often better to let the consequences speak for themselves – I have seldom heard, for example, a ‘parent lecture’ that worked. Also ensure that you allow your teen opportunities to ‘save face’ by allowing them taking responsibility without forcing them to say “you were right mom/dad.” No one likes being put in that kind of situation, least of all teenagers who are trying to become more autonomous while developing a cohesive sense of self.

While there are many comparisons between a manager and the parent of an adolescent, it is also important to remember that at the end of the day, you *care* about your child and they will also need your emotional support from time to time. So unlike a manager’s relationship to his employees, you are more emotionally invested in your children and need to be sensitive to their feelings. To this end, I encourage parents to think about parenting with ‘soft hands’ while ensuring that they have a ‘firm centre’ when it comes to having expectations that will hold their teens accountable for taking greater responsibility for their lives.