

In the seemingly endless years my wife and I have had kids, I've learned more about managing people than in the thirty-six years before they arrived. I've learned that managing (some) adults is virtually indistinguishable from managing kids: it can be the most challenging thing in the world...and it can also be the most rewarding.

Here are ten things I've learned from my kids that have proven extremely useful in managing adult employees (and subcontractors, and my wife, and my friends, and...and...and...well, I think you get the idea). Select an idea to read out more about it:

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1. Make them think for themselves...

They don't grow unless they do.

As parents, it's always a temptation to have an answer ready for every problem our children bring us. We want to help relieve the frustration that unsolved problems can cause. Unfortunately, always solving a kid's problems is one of the quickest ways to kill imagination and creative thinking.

In business, as in life, stifling creative thinking is one of the biggest disservices we can do to our companies, our employees, and ourselves.

I've learned that when I resist the urge to provide a quick answer and expect (force?) my children to find their own answers, the problem gets solved with more imagination, more creativity, and often in a way that I would never have thought of. And because they were forced to actually think through the problem and find their own solution, they're more likely to follow-through with the solution and to get their friends on-board with the idea, too.

When my kids ask me a "What should I...?" or a "How do I...?" question, I answer by asking them "What do *you* think?" or "What do you suggest?" And this simple solution works as well with adults as it does with kids.

Try it at the office.

Once folks understand you're serious about letting them solve their own problems, an amazing thing happens - many of them will actually start coming up with imaginative solutions to bear on the problem...and you'll see some surprisingly inventive solutions coming out of your previously unimaginative employees. You'll see better solutions, you'll see morale improve, you'll see people expand their capabilities and their horizons and you'll see able to spend more time concentrating *your* work.

Of course, letting people come up with their own solutions means that things will not always be done *your* way. Also, this doesn't mean you can abrogate *your* responsibility to make sure work meets specs, is done on time and kept within budget. It does mean that you'll have to accept there is more than one way of doing things...and your way will not always (not often?) be the method of choice.

2. Let them make mistakes...

it's part of growing up human!

Accept that mistakes will be made...particularly just after you start letting folks think for themselves. As a parent, you need to let your kids make mistakes. Your job is to make sure the mistakes don't kill them or tear down the house! As a manager, you need to stay aware of what's happening in your organization so you can identify the potentially big mistakes early and guide your people around them avoiding major damage. You don't need to micro-manage, but you do need to know what is going on in your organization...getting out and talking to people informally is critical.

Try to treat mistakes as a learning experience - once you accept that mistakes happen, you can put processes in place to get some benefit out of your organization's mistakes. Document and share the lessons you learn so you can avoid making the same mistakes again. If approached correctly, mistakes can be a valuable learning tool. Don't over-react. If you can do this, you'll find you're people are more willing to take calculated risks, and you'll also find that they're not constantly making the same mistakes over and over again!

I recently worked with a client whose business had reached a growth plateau. Employee turnover was close to 50% per year, and he told me he couldn't find any reliable employees capable of "doing the job right". Unfortunately, my client's approach to handling employee mistakes was to either fire the offending employee or insist on micro-managing the employee the first time they made an error. Those employees that remained quickly learned that the best way to keep their job was to avoid making decisions. Consequently, they pushed almost EVERY decision up to the boss. The business had grown as large as one person could manage.

Another part of a parent's job is to help the kids own up to and correct their mistakes. Managers have the same obligation. Make sure the employee who made the mistake works to fix the mistake(s) they cause. This doesn't mean you need to humiliate them in front of their peers, but it does mean that they need to accept the parts of the problem they caused and help as much as possible to correct the situation.

3. Give them regular and honest evaluation of their performance.

And recognize their achievements - enthusiasm withers and dies without it.

There are few things that frustrate my sons more than working hard, doing a good job and having no-one notice. When my wife and I forget this with our kids, they keep pestering us until one of us recognizes their efforts. Once they get their recognition, they're happy to get back to work again. A few simple words of honest praise or thanks for a job well done are enough to re-energize them and get them working harder.

The same concept applies with adult employees. Unfortunately with adults, when you fail to recognize achievements and hard work, you rarely get off with simple pestering. When your employees don't get due recognition or thanks, their disappointment shows up as decreased job satisfaction, lowered morale, theft, sabotage, or other more destructive (or even violent) behaviors.

When I was a flight instructor, I had to evaluate each student's performance at the end of each day's flight. I was taught to start every de-briefing on a positive note...to find *something* that was positive in each flight to lead off with, even if it was as basic as "well, you didn't kill us today". As long as it was *sincere*, discussing a positive first helped the student relax and listen better, and remain more open for the less positive parts of the evaluation.

Take an *honest* interest in your people's work. Find something good to say about their work...even if it's as simple as, "I really appreciate that you're the first one here in the morning". Recognize their achievements, and appreciate they're hard work.

But don't overdo it either - people can spot a phony. You don't need to praise every little thing. However, you needn't wait for the major technology breakthrough, the record setting productivity increase, or the heroic, last minute save of a program before you dole out the praise. I don't believe that a simple, honest "thank you" or "good job" each time they put their toys away, clean up their area or finish a task, is not over-doing it.

Make the effort, you'll be surprised at how well it works...and how much more pleasant your job becomes.

4. Don't tolerate intentional misconduct.

Ignoring it only makes it worse.

Honest mistakes are one thing, intentional misconduct is another. Stopping intentionally destructive behavior quickly and forcefully is critical to the health of any organization, whether

it's a family or a business. Happily, for most parents and most managers, it's one of the more rare activities we have to deal with.

Whether it's breaking toys (or business equipment), writing viruses into software, harassing fellow employees, or worse destructive behavior needs to be stopped immediately. If it isn't, the occurrences only get worse, ruining the morale of everyone in the organization and, in the worst case, spreading to the other "kids" in the family, too.

Of course these things need to be approached with some sensitivity, too. While I don't see anything wrong with bringing the "fullest extent of the law" to bear in the worst situations, understanding the causes of the behavior and working to remove those causes is also critical to the long-term health of the organization. And you need to make sure the punishment fit the crime. -

I also believe it's in everyone's best interest to forgive and move on. Whether it's suspension, firing, or criminal prosecution, make sure the punishment fits the crime. and keeping the it from becoming personal. Excessive punishment or punishment motivated by revenge can destroy morale as more quickly than the initial destructive behavior.

5. Sharing is a good thing.

Kids who share with others get along better.

We teach our kids to share their toys because it makes them "better people". Yet, as adults how many times do we build "kingdoms" to keep from sharing our toys (critical information or resources) from others inside and outside our organization?

It's a natural tendency to want to keep what's "ours", but what is true for our kids works in our world, too. In recent years, information sharing has become the new "holy grail" of the business world. And with something intangible like information, it's essential that managers do everything possible to keep the information flowing throughout the organization. Don't allow your people to horde critical information, and don't you withhold critical resources others within your organization need.

And, if you have any say over how profits are distributed, consider sharing the wealth with those who created it: employees and customers. Use bonuses, raises and other creative ways of letting the people who helped create the wealth have a taste of spending it!

And share with those in your community. Contribute to and/or sponsor events for local charities and community organizations. Encourage your people to share their skills with the community, and give them the means and opportunity to do it (see number 10 below!). Sharing your company's know-how may be the best thing you can offer to the community.

Do what you can to promote an environment where sharing is the norm, instead of some elusive holy grail achieved only after a long and arduous journey through hell.

6. Make work fun...

and everyone will want to do it!

Whether it's making a game of picking up toys for the two year old, or reading road signs for the kids reading how to learn, when my wife and I make a game of the work, it always goes smoother. Kids work much faster and do better work when we make it fun.

Not surprisingly, the same holds true for adults. When they have work they enjoy, they work harder, longer and better. This doesn't mean you need clowns and comedians wandering the hallways (unless you're running a comedy club), but do what you can to organize and assign the work so everyone's job includes *something* aspects that are challenging and "entertaining" for them. This won't completely eliminate those mundane, boring tasks that are part of every business, but it will give your employees some variety to make the job more interesting and "fun". Use some imagination and let the people who do the work have some say in how it's organized.

Of course, this means that you'll have to actually find out what each person's strengths and weaknesses are...but isn't that the whole point of managing, anyway - figuring out how to motivate people and make an organization run better?

7. Track their progress...

It Keeps them focused on the objective(s).

You can use tracking charts for a whole bunch of things with kids: from physical growth to how well they do their chores to how many books they've read. Providing them a chart to plot their progress on lets them visualize their progress (especially when they can compare it with other kid's progress), helps them understand how they're doing, and fosters competition. It also helps develop their planning skills by highlighting where they're behind, and where they need to concentrate more effort.

This works well with adults, too. Measuring and tracking critical individual and team performance indicators helps people . But there are some cautions here, as well:

- Make sure what you track is important to the business.
- Make sure you can actually measure what you're tracking...inaccurate data usually does more harm than good.
- You don't try to track everything! Too many metrics can cause people to lose focus on the critical indicators. Decide what's important and track those things.
- Be prepared to change what you track as your business changes. What's important today may not be important tomorrow! Put processes in place that force you look at your business, it's environment and what you consider key metrics on a regular basis.

And like I said earlier: make it fun, expect mistakes, and recognize accomplishments.

8. New things are scary...

even when you're prepared for them.

Most try to prepare our kids for new situations before they encounter them. Although it doesn't completely eliminate their fear, it *does* reduce it a great deal and, in some cases, turns a scary situation into a fun, new challenge. Most of us still want and *need* stability in our lives...I know that after going through four buy-outs in eight years, I certainly longed for some stability!

It's only been in the last hundred years or so where the rate of technological change has accelerated to a point where state of the art technology at the beginning of ones life can be found only in a museum at the end of a person's life. And it's only been about the last sixty years that the rate of social change has accelerated to where our entire social order changes within one person's lifetime - a mere drop in the bucket, evolutionarily speaking! And whether or not you believe in evolution, as a species, I don't believe humans have had enough time adapt to these changes.

Plan for changes and let your people know as early as possible what's coming - especially when it will have an impact on their lives. Remember that not knowing good changes can cause more stress than knowing about bad. Share information - educate your people about changes *before* you implement them! Get their input during the planning stages whenever possible.

9. Kids need rest.

When they don't get it, they're cranky and unmanageable.

If you've ever had to deal with a two-year-old who hasn't had enough sleep, you'll understand this one. They're petulant and cranky and reasoning with them is even more useless than when they've had enough sleep! And although adults are usually able to hide it a little better and a little longer, we all get petulant and cranky when we're tired and overworked.

This lesson was brought home to me when I managed a program where almost every member of the team averaged 79 or more hours per week (including holidays and vacations) for more than 36 months. Even though no-one was forced the team to work these hours (there were actually times when I had to kill the computers to get them to go home); by the end of the program, error rates had increased noticeably, our acceptance rates had decreased and everyone was noticeably people were burned out.

Human beings aren't built to handle this kind of constant overwork...that's why airline pilots have strict flight hour limitations. People (including you and I) need breaks from work on regular basis. It took some of my people more than a year to fully recover.

I understand that Every business goes through "crunch" periods where long hours are needed to get the job done on time; but it's important that these crunch periods don't become the be norm. Unfortunately, as the world gets smaller and competition increases, many more companies are making (or at least allowing) this the norm.

Make your people get out of the office after a full day's work. If they've been working long hours for long periods of time, you might need to lock them out of their office once in a while to get them to take a break.

(10) Family is important.

Give them time (and opportunity) to enjoy theirs!

Family is very important to kids...and, whether they admit it or not, to most adults, too.

While parents can force their kids to spend time with their family, managers can only encourage their employees to. We can make it easy for them to take care of doctor's appointments, family meetings and activities at schools, and all those little family things that come up for all of us during work hours.

Let employees know that *you and the company* places value on them having a life outside work. Instituting flex-time is one of the easiest ways to do this. It gives your employees the flexibility they need to have a personal life while making sure the job gets done. Some companies provide daycare services, and

And make them take their vacations.

In today's stress filled business environment, it is imperative that people take a break away from the job. Having time to pursue outside interests and focus on things other than work helps clear the mind, inspired creativity and makes for happier people.

This means you might sometimes actually have to force people to take their vacations and holidays. Some companies have tried to force their people to take longer breaks by: establishing "use or lose" vacation policies, requiring that vacation be taken in 3, 4, or 5 day blocks; or implementing vacation planning periods at the beginning of each year. making them plan their vacation period(s) at the beginning of each year (allowing some flexibility for "emergencies" later in the year).

It also means that you have to accept that your people will be unavailable to you during their vacation periods! No fair calling them in to work, texting, them with "just a quick question", or e-mailing them files "to review when you've got a minute". Their vacation is their time, not yours!

This requires discipline and up-front planning on your part, but if you do it, your employees will appreciate it and are likely to work harder when they get back.