

Preparing a Teacher for Management

by Martin Seidenfeld

When an owner or manager in the child care industry recognizes a worker who is very good at her job, she may con-

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sider promoting that worker into a management position. That can be a problem, for while the superior worker may have had many years of practice at hands-on work, she probably has had very little — if any — training, in how to manage others.

To help child care workers move from being

employees to being the managers of others, supervisors must inculcate in them three crucial principles:

1. Managers' behavior and attitudes will be the behavior and attitudes their employees will emulate.
2. Managers cannot be buddies with the people they supervise.
3. Managers must organize and lead others to perform specific tasks,

rather than perform them themselves.

At a profound psychological level, managers are not seen as normal human beings — and therefore cannot act as such. The reasons for this are complex and are rooted in our very natures. To better understand this, let's go on an imaginary trip.

Imagine that you live in a world of giants. Close your eyes for a moment and visualize a world in which everyone around you is a giant, perhaps 18 to 20 feet tall. You have to crane your neck to see their heads. You can walk through their legs without crouching. They are awesome.

In this world of giants, everything is built to giant scale, so you are completely dependent on them. For example, you are thirsty and see a sink. But the taps are way up out of your reach and the glasses are too large for you to grasp. Fortunately, some giants sense your needs and get you some water. Mostly though, they just ignore you . . . which is okay. Of course, your big worry is that those giants might become angry with you. In that case you'd be in deep, serious trouble.

Pretty intimidating, isn't it?

Perhaps you recognize, or, more properly, remember, this world. It's where you lived when you were two and three years old and only came up to your parents' mid-thighs.

Consider this important fact about us *Homo sapiens*: as infants, we are the most helpless of all newborns and have the longest period of total dependency. A newborn fish can swim and provide for its own nutritional needs. A bird might be fed in the nest for a few months. Most large mammals can get along by themselves within a year of their births. But how old must a human be in order to survive on its own?

Certainly, it's many years. So, having lived for many years in a state of inadequacy and being totally dependent on friendly giants, to a life or death degree, do we ever get completely over it?

Or might we retain, unconsciously, some vague memory-sense of that early condition so that, when we interact with parents — or parental figures — like managers! — we again feel that sense of smallness and yes, fearfulness? I believe we do have such unconscious memo-

ries. So, when a manager, who is probably a perfectly decent, normal human being, asks an employee to, “please step into my office,” something happens. We don’t simply accept his invitation as one normal adult talking to another. An element of anxiety creeps in.

Most people can recognize that they feel some unease when dealing with their supervisors. It is much harder for new managers to accept that their employees react to them as being the giants and, at some level, fear them.

Because of this biologically programmed development, employees always have a special regard for managers, and this isn’t always positive. Managers are watched very closely because they are perceived as powerful. To some extent, it’s true: managers do choose employees’ work assignments, perhaps conduct their performance assessments and, ultimately, could significantly affect their incomes. But because of the underlying psychological realities, managers’ power tends to be vastly exaggerated. New managers must understand and accept that they will always be perceived to some extent, as “giants.” Accepting this, they can then effectively be taught the three crucial management principles:

I.

A manager’s behavior and attitudes will be the behavior and attitudes her employees will emulate.

On the positive side is the fact that if managers are enthusiastic, show deep concern for their customers, work hard, demonstrate the importance of quality work, and generally show a strong work ethic, they will be miles ahead towards building an effective work force. Their work habits and ethics will be adopted by their employees.

On the negative side is the fact that even small misbehaviors of theirs will also be emulated. For example, if they take off early, or take an extra long lunch break, their employees will assume that goofing off is okay. If they dress too casually, it will be assumed that the dress code doesn’t really apply. Managers are models and set the standards, and their behavior becomes the organization’s norms.

2.

Managers cannot be buddies with the people they supervise.

The single biggest complaint about managers is that they are not fair. This pitfall can be avoided by managers always remembering this second crucial principle.

As normal human beings, they will feel closer to some of their employees than to others because of their common backgrounds or interests or lifestyles or personalities. Naturally, they would tend to befriend them. But because they are managers, this would be extremely unwise.

How could they discipline the person they had dinner with last night? How could they refuse a request to break a minor company rule, coming from a person whose kids play with theirs? How could they perform an objective performance assessment on people with whom they vacation, or spend time visiting back and forth?

When people work closely together, relationships inevitably develop. The trick is for managers to be friendly, sympathetic, interested in each of their employees as unique individuals — and yet retain carefully structured “formal” relationships with each of them. Socialization should be limited to the company Christmas holiday party and Fourth of July picnic.

Even if a new manager were exactly, objectively, 100% fair and unbiased (which would be very hard to achieve) other employees, knowing that they socialized with one employee, would assume that employee to be their “pet.” Morale would sink, the manager’s esteem would be lowered and, ultimately, productivity would decline.

3.

Managers must organize and lead others to perform specific tasks, rather than perform them themselves.

A manager’s job is to get things done through others. The manager’s energy must shift from focusing on specific tasks to focusing on leadership.

A regular employee’s value depends on how productive she is personally. But a manager must be concerned with how well her staff performs. Therefore, it makes sense for managers to help their workers become more proficient, rather than to focus on their personal proficiency.

As the new manager’s trainer, you should explain how, if the manager headed a center with ten employees, nine workers and herself, and she were able to increase her personal productivity by 20% (which would be a tremendous improvement) she would have increased her ten-person work unit’s overall productivity by 2%. But suppose, instead, she trained and motivated each of her employees so that, on the average, they each increased their productivity by just 5%. In that case she would have increased overall productivity by 45%! It should not be hard for the new manager to see which would be the better strategy.

The underlying problem is that we all like to do what we do well. Since the new manager performed very well as a

worker, the temptation is for her to keep doing that same work. But doing those familiar tasks may become a disguised “security blanket.”

You should expect newly promoted managers to avoid exercising strong leadership, a skill with which they have had little experience and in which they may feel they have little expertise. Nonetheless, their essential focus must shift from doing the work themselves to managing the work of others, organizing, planning, developing, and leading them.

True, owners and managers often do need to do some of the hands-on, direct child care work. But all too frequently, new managers use this as a rationalization to largely ignore their managerial responsibilities. To the extent that a manager does the basic work, she is not truly functioning as a manager since, by definition, a manager is someone who gets things done through others.

New managers must be made to realize that their future career/business growth will depend on their ability to manage others effectively. If they merely remain proficient workers, they will continue to be workers, even though they have management titles.

Conclusion

Becoming a manager is not easy, and many won't make the cut. By teaching and modeling the three crucial principles outlined here you will increase your odds of developing a truly successful manager.

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