Dealing with Irresponsible Behavior

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Imagine that you are a leader with a team member who behaves irresponsibly. You believe the individual has the potential to contribute, but you have not yet found the key to motivating the person beyond superficial commitment. How do you handle this seeming "no-win" situation?

For the past two weeks, I have described interactions between individuals by using three ego states: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child. Traditional discipline invokes the power of the Parent (the manager) to threaten to end the employment relationship of the irresponsible Child (the errant team member). If you missed those columns, please contact me and I will provide copies.

Advantages exist for the manager who can creatively build an **Adult-Adult** relationship with the faltering team member. If the extra efforts work, the individual can become a long-term contributor and the organization avoids the costs associated with turnover (advertising, interviewing, and training). If the extra efforts fail, the fallback position remains ending the individual's employment.

In traditional **Parent-Child** discipline, you as the manager are the decision-maker. The options appear simple: "Do I fire the person or tolerate the situation, allowing one more chance?"

In **Adult-Adult** discipline, you as the manager work to put the team member in the role of decision-maker, clarifying this perspective for the individual. Holding him or her accountable for the decisions that affect continued employment and contribution is the key.

The first step is assuring that the irresponsible individual knows what is expected and why. Prepare clear written notes in which you identify the desired behavior, the behaviors observed to date, and why the variance is unacceptable and will no longer be tolerated. (You may wonder, "Is this necessary?" Yes, some individuals will truly struggle to understand what "unacceptable" entails.)

Next, write down all the possible options for future behaviors, both desirable and undesirable. With each option, specify your expected response as the company's official representative. Emphasize that you are identifying these cause-and-effect relationships to empower the formerly irresponsible team member to be the decision-maker regarding his or her future with the organization.

The irresponsible individual may start a "What if…" line of questioning. Despite the annoyance, stay cool and do not allow this deception to move you out of the Adult ego state into the Parent's "controlling" mode. Merely write down each option that the team member offers, taking whatever time you need to seriously evaluate your anticipated response to each. (Caution: Don't make promises that you may not be able to keep! Review your proposed write-up with your Human Resource advisor. Avoid putting yourself "out there" without known support from those who will have to agree with your decision should it come to terminating the person's employment.)

Conclude this conversation (and the write-up) with this simple summary statement: "If you do (this or this), you'll continue to be an employee here. If, however, you do (this, this, or this), you will have chosen to end your employment, and you will have put me in the uncomfortable position of having to escort you to the front door for the last time. Be assured that I am prepared to do this, as uncomfortable as it will be for me. The choice about your future with this organization is yours, not mine. If that is not now clear to you, what are your questions?"

I advise that you have another manager present for this conversation to observe the conversation. Sign the write-up in the presence of the team member and the other manager, then present the write-up to each of the two individuals for their signatures, asking them to sign the document as witnesses, so it doesn't later become a contention of your word against that of the poor performer.

I have seen team members respond favorably to this clarification of their responsibilities. Some have become significant contributors to their organizations. Sure, the majority fail to perform and wind up losing their jobs, but the many advantages of this approach justify the extra effort required.

I will describe the less obvious advantages of this **Adult-Adult** approach next week.