Parents, Adults, and Children—Part 2

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Last week, I presented a simple methodology for describing the behavioral interactions between individuals. I explained the three ego states that exist within each of us: Parent, Adult, and Child. (If you've not seen that column, please look for it ("Parents, Adults, and Children—Part 1) on my website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives/.

Parent-Child is the stereotypical dictatorial relationship between boss and subordinate. It may have been an appropriate relationship at some time in the distant past, perhaps when bosses tended to do the thinking and subordinates tended to do physical work based on strength or manual dexterity.

Everything that is created begins as an idea (the mental creation), then is fabricated in physical form. The role of the manager used to be to think about what needed to be done, then direct the workers on what to do and how to do it. Because the nature of work has changed so significantly over time, this **Parent-Child** relationship rarely seems relevant in today's organizations.

Adult-Adult is a far more appropriate relationship between individuals in the workplace. Organizations exist to solve or prevent problems in supplying products or services to their customers. Individuals who collaborate in thinking about and working together to improve conditions can bring about superb progress, with great satisfaction for both individuals.

Parent-Parent occurs when individuals are competing, sometimes for a promotion, often just to have their idea chosen as the most preferred. This kind of power struggle always breaks down into some less inflammatory relationship, often **Parent-Child** (in which one party has given in--usually reluctantly and with little commitment to the Parent's direction). Sometimes the power struggle degrades into a **Child-Child** squabble, as if two youngsters are fighting over a toy in the sandbox.

For much of my career, I have used this Parent-Adult-Child model in training managers to productively handle disciplinary situations. Discipline easily throws managers into the traditional authoritarian Parent state, with little or no patience for the unproductive behaviors of the irresponsible Child. "I'll fire you!" is so immediately in the mind--maybe even on the lips—of managers who might normally be docile, introverted, or self-controlled.

The **Parent-Child** method of discipline is tempting because it seems so natural. However, there is a far healthier approach to discipline. Managing your awareness and behavior so that you stay in the Adult ego state--and give plenty of opportunity for the errant team member to also choose the Adult state--is far more productive for the manager, the individual, and the team in the long run.

A major advantage of attempting discipline in an **Adult-Adult** way is the effect that the disciplinary disruption has on the teammates of the irresponsible team member. Whether you realize it or not, they are watching your every move. They are curious about how you handle this situation. Though you may appear patient and compassionate throughout the gut-wrenching discipline process, some of these teammates will be unaware of--and probably not even care about--your internal anguish.

All they know is that a friend is possibly going to soon be unemployed. No matter how much you explain the circumstances, some team members will wonder "Could I be next?" Such fear rarely moves an individual to perform more consistently in the desired Adult state. Instead, fearful individuals retrench into the low-profile Child ego state, showing little initiative or energy, doing only what is safe and required to stay out of trouble.

It may be hard to imagine the irresponsible team member ever responding in a rational, fact-processing Adult way. If you act from the Parent state, however, you preclude any response except that of a resistant, emotional, self-centered Child. (Remember, Parent/Adult does not yield healthy long-term results!) Thus, your only viable alternative for encouraging an Adult problem-resolving decision is to discipline yourself to offer only responsible, option-generating Adult behavior.

I will share how to do that next week.