

Dealing with Irresponsible Behavior

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Imagine that you are a leader with a team member who behaves irresponsibly. You believe the person has potential to contribute, but you've not 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, Adult, and Child. Traditional discipline invokes the power of the Parent (the manager) to threaten ending the employment relationship of the irresponsible Child (the errant employee). 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 not?"

In **Adult-Adult** discipline, you as the manager work to clearly put the employee in the role of decision-maker. Holding the individual accountable for the decisions affecting his or her future is the key.

The first step is assuring that the irresponsible individual knows what is expected and why. Prepare very 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.

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 employee to be the decision-maker regarding his or her future with the organization.

The irresponsible employee may start a "What if..." line of questioning. Despite the annoyance, stay cool and don't allow this deception to move you out of the Adult mode into the Parent mode. Merely write down each option that the employee 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 be to terminate 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 communicate this to you and escorting you to the front door. 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. Is that clear?"

Sign the write-up in the presence of the individual, then present the write-up to the individual for his or her signature. I advise that you have another manager present for this conversation to observe the communication and to sign the document as a witness.

I have seen employees 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 to this approach justify the extra effort it requires.

I'll describe the advantages of this **Adult-Adult** approach next week.