What Parenthood Taught Me About Inspiring Self-Reliance in Others

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As a parent, you want your kids to eventually become independent adults — but this transformation doesn't happen overnight. It involves carefully and gradually giving them more freedoms and responsibilities over years of growth and development until they reach a point where they're capable of making important or even risky decisions for themselves.

Mentorship is much the same way. When someone is new to a role, they might need more hand-holding. But as they grow, you need to be able to loosen the reins a bit. Just like in parenthood, this process can be scary. It's different for everyone, and there's always a risk of letting go too soon. But as both a parent and the founder of the free school fundraising platform FutureFund, I've seen firsthand that you have more to gain from this than you have to lose.

Here's what parenthood has taught me about encouraging self-reliance at home and in the workplace.

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Helicopter parents & micromanagers are cut from the same cloth

Parenting and managing are both very personal roles, so people

tend to take them seriously. That's usually a good thing – but sometimes it leads to over-involvement.

You probably know parents who micro-manage. Several close friends of mine, whom I respect greatly, insisted on watching every movie and listening to every song their kids were interested in before letting them do it. They monitored their children's browsing history and went through their phones regularly because they didn't trust them. I've seen managers do the same thing.

Some managers feel the need to personally review every decision their direct reports make. I understand that this can simply feel like a careful approach to risk management. But what it actually does is take away your subordinates' capacity to own their own decisions.

Over time, this approach actually makes your team dependent on you to an unhealthy degree – and means you constantly have to hold their hand, even to solve minor problems. They become the workplace equivalent of sheltered children who can't fend for themselves in the world.

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Shielding people doesn't ultimately help them

I care about what my kids see on their phones and computers, but I don't peek over their shoulders or install spyware on their devices. I always tell them, "You'll come across stuff on the internet that makes you feel uncomfortable, but my job isn't to shield you from it – it's to help you deal with it."

Your job as a manager isn't to shield people, either. It's to help them deal with the problems they face. If you don't, you're not protecting them in the long run. You're just taking

away their ability to make decisions — not to mention their ability to learn from the results of those decisions, be they positive or negative.

As a parent, you want your kids to eventually learn the difference between what's right and wrong for themselves. You want them to be guided by their own strong moral compass, not to hear your voice in their head every time they're faced with an important choice.

It's the same for your employees. They should be able to develop their own strong instincts for solving problems in the workplace, not constantly worrying about doing what they think you would want. That's how they become effective leaders capable of providing their own valuable perspective instead of just relying on yours.

So here's a phrase from parenthood that I've come to use a lot at work: "My job is to advise; your job is to decide." Remember, it's your job to make sure they've thought of everything. It's not your job to make the call for them.

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Ask clarifying questions instead of delivering verdicts

Whenever someone asks, "Is this okay?", be very careful when answering.

Let's say one of your team members spends three weeks on an engineering project. After they've completed all the tests, they bring the project to you for your approval. If you can take it apart in 30 minutes after they've done all that work, they're either very green in their role, or you have the wrong person.

Instead of making the call for them, ask questions and see how they answer. You may not even understand what they've built – but you may not need to. Ask questions like:

- What would you do if this part broke?
- What are the redundancies?
- How would you improve this if you had more time or resources?

This will show you what their thought process was and how carefully they thought through their work.

I've often found that people who are faced with these questions bring up artificial constraints like cost and time. "We want to do more, but we can't afford it" is a very common response. I usually reply, "Who decided that?". More often than not, they realize it wasn't actually a limiting factor.

As a parent, it's the same. Part of helping a child grow is encouraging them to do things they don't believe they're capable of doing. Your kid might be about to give up when they're trying out for a team you know they're good enough to be on, but asking them to try harder simply isn't enough. You have to help them understand their own potential instead of just telling them it's there – because even if you can see it, they can't yet.

When you help kids realize their potential, they do amazing things, like raise $17,000 for their school football team. When you help your employees do the same, they do amazing things like write in new features, find new ways to promote their ideas, or feel empowered to take risks and explore new possibilities.

Asking the right questions can help them find that missing piece of the puzzle that completes the whole picture.

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