

## **YOU MANAGE LIKE YOUR MOTHER!**

Please don't email me about the title of this article. I know I don't know your mother, and I would never think to criticize her. Your mother is probably a great manager, that really is not the point. What we'll look at in the following paragraphs is not the effectiveness of your mom's management style, but the likelihood that many of our management tendencies are a product of what we experienced in our home environment. Our management styles, our communication styles, and our leadership styles are often influenced by our upbringing.

Leadership and management, however you define and differentiate them, are largely about our paradigms, or attitudes, about people. Those paradigms are influenced by what we saw and learned growing up. We may have adopted our family's paradigms intentionally or unintentionally, or rejected our family's paradigms very intentionally, but either way we have been impacted. Among many possibilities, this article will select four areas where it is useful to do some self-reflection to understand our approach.

### ***Our View of People***

This is the most basic of approaches, and relates to the question of trust or suspicion of people. Do you see people as basically hard working, motivated, and passionate about doing work of the highest quality for its own intrinsic award? Alternatively, did you spit coffee through your nose as you read that last sentence, because you "know" that left to themselves people are basically non-motivated and will try to get away with the least amount of work possible? Growing up in a very conservative Baptist home, where "total depravity" was a basic tenet of humanity, my own view of people began far more negatively than that to which it has ultimately evolved.

The difference these views make in management and leadership style is, as I'm sure you can imagine, profound. I will manage a group of people of whom I am suspicious very differently from a group I trust implicitly. I will be far more hands-on and directive if I do not believe in the self-motivation of employees. While there is not the space in this short article to give a full justification, I would argue that until a leader or manager can come to see people in the more positive light, they will never be able to change counter-productive management styles, and they will likely have a very difficult time gaining the engagement of their staff.

### ***Our View of Feedback***

Were you raised in a family that was very expressive, that celebrated every accomplishment with hugs and praise? If so, it is likely that you tend to give lots of feedback to your staff. On the other hand if you were raised in a family where successful accomplishment of tasks was assumed and praise was avoided as the path to complacency, you may tend to withhold feedback. My sisters and I were raised on the proverb, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all"! Not an environment that lended itself to good use of constructive criticism. Perhaps you were raised in one of those families where the unwritten rule was "Assume I love you until such time as I tell you differently." These differences of nurturing, along with differences of personality, impact both how we give feedback and how we prefer to receive it.

Some individuals need concrete and frequent acknowledgement that they are valued or they begin to feel alienated and disengaged. Others are highly self-motivated and would really rather

not have any “fuss” made over their work. Leaders need to be aware of the preferences and styles of their employees and aware of their own tendencies, or they can easily fall prey to interacting with each of their staff from only one approach.

### ***Our View of Authority***

“Because I’m your mother, that’s why!” Sound familiar? That line was very effective in quelling verbal dissent in our home, though it seldom created an open dialogue and interaction. Leadership books often speak to the differences between power coming from *position* and power coming from *influence*. Do I expect my staff to respond to me because I am the boss, or because I have earned their trust, confidence and loyalty through example and behaviours?

Leading through influence requires more effort, more thoughtfulness and more concern for people than leading by position. It asks for more faith in humanity than some of us can muster. That faith is stretched even further when we are leading through crisis situations and using influence seems far more risky than using authority of position. Nevertheless, any short term gains that come from using one’s power of position will likely be offset by the disengagement and lowering of morale that will be the probable result of the corporate version of “because I’m your mother!”

### ***Our View of Delegation***

Another maxim that could be heard around our home growing up was that “if you want something done right, do it yourself”. Never being too much of a handy person, many of my early attempts to craft or repair ended up with my father “doing it himself”, and as a result it wasn’t till I finally got out on my own that I found that I had some ability after all. Our propensity to delegate is also related to our view of people discussed above. If I believe my staff to be less committed to the task or to excellence than I am myself, I will be very slow to hand off to them projects of significance. If I do hand them projects, and yet in the back of my mind believe that “if I want it done right...”, I will likely spend much time looking over their shoulder and micromanaging, waiting for them to fail so that I can step in and take it back. As you can imagine, this is not a recipe for employee engagement and satisfaction.

### ***Conclusion***

So what is the point? Again, let me rush to clarify that it has nothing to do with your mother, or mine, who is a lovely woman. It is that if we fail to take the time to reflect on our leadership attitudes and approaches, we will tend to fall back on what we know and what is comfortable, which may or may not be productive in helping us achieve our goals. We are able to change counterproductive behaviours and actions in leadership, but only if we are aware of our tendencies and evaluate their effectiveness. Another saying that got a lot of airplay in our house was “think before you speak!” If I can adjust that just a little I would say “reflect before you lead!”

Written by Jerry Colwell, CHRP  
Director of Client Services  
For more information:  
[jerry@pathways.on.ca](mailto:jerry@pathways.on.ca)  
519-667-7795