
The More Important a Relationship, the Less Skill Matters

AMERICA IS A nation obsessed by technology. We have benefited from so many technological successes that we are now willing, even eager, to apply technology to every area of our lives—even the most personal, such as romance, marriage, and parenthood. When I say that we apply technology in those areas I mean that increasingly we treat human relationships as requiring skill and technique. Thus, it is only natural that we have come to regard the job of a manager as essentially the acquisition of techniques we call “management skills.” Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually in teaching these skills to managers.

Of course, skills are necessary in management. Gaining skill in planning, organizing, and scheduling no doubt improves the performance of managers. It is when we attempt to apply skills to the most challenging area of management, that of human relations, that they desert us. This is especially true when we try to handle those people who mean the most to us—our closest colleagues. Here, skills don't help.

Answers, but No Method

Perhaps I can illustrate this paradox best by drawing on some examples from parenthood. In a sense parenthood is a special case of management.

Some years ago, to gather material for a book, I talked with a number of adults about their childhood, how they were "parented." One question I asked was: "As you think back over your own childhood and the relationship that you had with your parents, can you remember any specific actions or events which you particularly value and which seem to you to have been significant to your development?" Their responses were charming and often amusing, but it was hard to see how they could be helpful to a new mother or father looking for advice on parenting:

My parents had make-believe fights with wet dishcloths.

When I sat on my dad's lap, he pretended to scold me because my hair tickled his chin.

We loved it when Mom made believe she was Dracula and scared us.

My father, in his coat and tie, sat on the ground with me and ate these dirty baked potatoes I had cooked in the backyard.

We almost died laughing when Daddy fell into our cesspool up to his armpits while playing with us.

When I was learning to drive, I ran into the same car three times, but my mom took the blame.

We really liked it when our parents did their silly monster walk in the supermarket.

The most important feature of these recollections is that they do not represent anything recognizable as a parenting technique or skill. Never, in all my interviews, did anyone ever mention an episode that might have been derived from a parent training manual. For the most part, they spoke of acts that parents did not do deliberately, as something they

thought would be good for their children's development. Rather, they remembered acts that had a spontaneous, even accidental quality, sometimes breaking all the rules. These moments were memorable because they were different from what the child was used to getting from the parent. We could construct theories about parental behavior from these responses. But we could not use them to develop techniques or specific "how-to" advice.

I Had to Ask

But what about management? I realized, of course, that the relationship between boss and employee is hardly analogous to a parent-child relationship. But what if I asked people to remember specific incidents with their bosses? Would their responses be in any way similar? Well, I had to find out, so I began to ask everyone I met the same kind of question. You can guess the kind of answers I got.

While I was taking dictation, my very businesslike boss did something very uncharacteristic. He stopped to kid me about some drops of house paint that I didn't know were in my hair.

Once when I was drinking after hours with the manager at the restaurant where I worked, he said the only reason he had hired me was to "piss someone off," but I had turned out to be one of the best waiters they ever had.

I was still learning how to be a paramedic but I felt a lot better when my supervisor confessed that even after thirty years on the job, she still gets very scared at times.

As a junior faculty member, I had a difficult relationship with the dean of our school until one day when he became emotionally overwrought and told me how discouraging his career had been. After that, I had a new understanding of him and a much more cooperative attitude.

My boss and I were so ticked off by management that we applied for jobs together at another company. In the end, we didn't leave, but the experience put a new bond between us.

Not once did any of my respondents cite an episode that could have been learned in a management skill training program. In fact, most recalled behavior that would hardly be thought of as an approved management technique (for example, teasing, losing control emotionally, job hunting with an employee). They tended to be moments that the bosses were not likely to remember and would probably think were insignificant, yet often revealed something of their humanity. In these incidents the bosses may have exhibited spontaneity, genuineness, caring—but not skill.

A Dreadful World Avoided

In both parenthood and management, it's not so much what we *do* as what we *are* that counts. What parents do deliberately appears to make little difference in the most important outcomes—whether their children grow up to be happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, good or evil. There is no question that parents can and should do worthwhile things for their children, but it's what they are that will really matter; for example, whether they are sensitive and caring or cold and indifferent. Most children will adopt the characteristics that define their parents, whether their parents want them to or not.

The same dynamic occurs in management and leadership. People learn—and respond to—what we are. When you stop to think about it, perhaps that is the way it should be. What a dreadful world it would be if we actually did possess the skill to convey something other than what we really are.