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PARENTAL LEADERSHIP: A SITUATIONAL PROBLEM

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All parents give considerable thought and effort in determining how best to provide direction and leadership to their children. However, the complexities and temptations facing children today are overwhelming and can often leave parents with feelings of self doubt as to whether or not the approach they are using is the most appropriate. Parental leadership styles can vary from one extreme to another. In families where both parents are working there might be a tendency to provide a minimum of supervision. At the other extreme there might be a tendency to continually monitor and direct a child's behavior from sunup to sundown. Very much depends upon the parents' situation and preferred method of dealing with family problems. While most parents' intentions are without question, there are times when a consistently adopted means of leadership is inappropriate for the problem at hand and can do more harm than good.

It has been our experience at Paladin Associates that leadership styles observed in industrial settings can be applied to parental situations. We have observed that there are four distinct methods of managing and directing individuals to accomplish the behavioral outcomes desired by a manager or parent. These can be summarized as follows:

- **The Authoritarian Style:** This is one of the more commonly used approaches with parents. It includes the application of many rules and regulations imposed without discussion with the child. There is little personal interplay with the child regarding the rules and the rules are strictly enforced. This style is more appropriate for very immature children.
- **The Convincing Style:** This style, while still imposing stringent rules and regulations, involves more communication and interplay with the child in an effort to get the child to understand and to "buy into" the need for the prescribed behavior. This style is more effective as the child matures and has a better understanding of what constitutes acceptable behavior.
- **The Inquiring Style:** This style relies on less structure and rule setting, but requires close discussion and interplay with the child in an attempt to solicit positive input from the child regarding his/her appropriate or inappropriate behavior. This style requires a reasonable level of maturity in the child in order to be successful.
- **The Relinquishing Style:** This style is only appropriate for mature children. It allows for a somewhat "hands off" approach with minimal direction or parental

guidance. This style is sometimes applied by working parents out of necessity, but if the child's maturity level is low it can be disastrous.

In many cases parents tend to be consistent in using one of the four styles, but being consistent in this regard is not usually effective. Parents should remember that children are often at different levels of maturity in various aspects of their lives. For example, a high school varsity volleyball player may be quite mature in her approach to the sport. She attends practices, watches her diet, and does not smoke or drink. She is quite mature in this area of her life and does not need a lot of parental interface. On the other hand, she may not be paying attention to her school work and lack of parental involvement will not correct this problem. The "hands off" approach will not work in improving her academic performance.

So how does a parent know when to change leadership styles? In addressing how to best provide direction to a child it is helpful to first examine the nature and source of the problem and to assign ownership of the problem. There are four possible scenarios:

1. The child's behavior is acceptable to both the parents and the child and therefore does not present a problem to either the parent or the child. In this situation neither parent or child owns the problem
2. The child's behavior is acceptable to the parents but not to the child. In this situation the child owns the problem. An example of this might be a school girl that does not use drugs. Her behavior is not a problem to her parents, but she is constantly pressured by her drug using friends to go along with them. The child owns the problem.
3. The child's behavior is acceptable to the child but not to the parents. In this situation the parents own the problem. An example might be a daughter who comes home very late from her first high school date.
4. The child's behavior is unacceptable to both child and parents. In this situation both own the problem. An example might involve a situation where the child has been assigned a certain number of chores and has been performing them in a timely manner. However, the parents unexpectedly add several other duties to the list, which the child finds unacceptable and rebels. Both now have the problem.

Once ownership of the problem is established it becomes a simple matter to determine the appropriate style of leadership. In situation #1 above, since neither have a problem the relinquishing leadership style would be appropriate. No intervention is required in this situation. In situation #2, however, where the child owns the problem, an intervention that is high on relationship and low on direction is required. This style is the inquiring leadership style. The tragedy here is that parents often treat this problem situation as if it were a problem to neither. If supportive intervention is not made here, there is a good probability that the situation will become a problem to both. In situation #3 where the parents own the problem there is no need for a high relationship intervention. The child simply needs to know the limits and an authoritarian style of role definition and clarification of goals would be appropriate. Finally, in situation #4 the convincing leadership style would be appropriate. The child needs the structure, but also

needs to understand the reasons behind the decision to add additional duties to his work load.

While the situational approach to leadership within the family setting may appear somewhat basic, it does point out the need for parents to be aware of the fact that a consistent and unchanging approach to problem solving is highly inappropriate and in most cases can compound the initial problem. If you would like additional information regarding parenting leadership or other applications of situational leadership please contact me at contactus@paladinexec.com Paladin Associates have been involved in leadership training for over 10 years and would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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