

Who's the Boss?

What we can learn about leadership from two year olds

by Kathy Pillow-Price

Have you ever noticed that when a parent of a two year old enters a room, another adult will frequently comment, "Well, I see you brought the boss with you." Then most others will laugh because they get the joke; they also know that there is some measure of truth in calling a two year old "a boss." In fact, many two year olds are quite adept at getting

things done their way without ever taking Leadership 101. How do they do it?

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Two year olds practice what I like to call "natural" leadership skills. That means that they know what to do to get others to do what they want, but they can't tell us how they know what to do. After observing enough two year olds (and living with three of them), I have found that most toddlers use a variety of strategies to get others to do what they want.

Leadership strategies

In observing two year olds I have identified seven key strategies they use to get what they want:

- persuasive communication
- listening skills
- reliance on teamwork
- openness to change
- social skills
- loyalty, trust
- commitment to lifelong learning

Let's take a closer look at each of these strategies, in turn, to explore what's going on.

Communication

When you observe two year olds' communication, it is immediately apparent that they are effective — and persuasive — communicators. Their communication is clear, direct, and consistent while their approach varies to suit the situation.

- A message from a toddler is clear and direct. They are factual and get to the point. They know what they want, and they communicate their message directly. They do not hint or expect mind reading — they tell!

Good leaders understand this important point of communication. They know that to get what you want, you have to get to the point and ASK!

- In addition to being direct, two year olds are consistent. In fact, their persistence can be unnerving at times! They are miniature Winston Churchills who have decided they will, "Never, never, never give up." If nothing else they are focused, and they keep those around them focused as well.

Good leaders take that approach when the message they have is important. If you want people to follow you, they have to know who you are, what you can do, and what you are going to ask of them. Communicating this should be easy — just come right out and tell them, and keep telling them as long as necessary.

- Two year olds are very adept at changing their communication approach. When it doesn't work they try another approach. If demanding or yelling is not working, they will try saying "please" or they might even modify their request a little or

even change the goal. They are willing to accept less than what they originally asked for to get **some** of what they want. Maybe they can't have a cookie, but will settle for a healthier box of raisins. Hey, a snack is a snack and progress is progress!

Good leaders know that communication is a two-way street; in order for communication to occur, a message has to be sent AND received. If one approach is not working, and the message is still being missed or misunderstood, it is probably time to change tactics. Even though you feel you have already been clear and consistent, it is like Lee Iacocca once said, "You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere."

Listening skills

Many of us have learned that when you are around young children, you have to watch what you say. If not, you are bound to hear them repeat something that you would prefer they didn't! Why is that? It's because two year olds are excellent listeners. In fact, their listening skills are far superior to that of many adults. To them listening is power — the power to learn, grow, and develop.

Two year olds learn about their world by listening, and great leaders can do the same. If leaders will commit themselves to learn better listening skills, they will find it leads to better recollection of important facts and issues later on, and results in fewer miscommunications. Improving your listening skills tends to increase people's respect for you; people tend to like, and respond better to, those who take the time to listen to them.

Great leaders understand that talking is not the most important part of communication. Many excellent leaders employ what they call the 80/20 rule of commu-

nication; they are committed to letting others talk 80 percent of the time, and allow themselves to talk 20 percent of the time. That means they listen a lot more than they speak. It is amazing what you can learn about your workplace and your employees simply by listening.

Teamwork

Since toddlers are limited in a lot of ways when it comes to physically getting the things they want, they seem to understand instinctively that they need others. They need others to get things for them, do things for them, and sometimes just be with them. They understand that with others they can accomplish things that are impossible for them to do alone. So, toddlers use their charms to encourage and convince others to help them.

Great leaders are also in the business of building alliances in the form of teams. Teamwork is actually a simple concept: a group of diverse individuals with different talents and skills achieving goals by working together with each person doing what he or she does best. Teamwork offers the opportunity to do more, achieve more, and be more efficient than one person alone. Teamwork increases performance and the likelihood of success. As the popular saying goes, "None of us is as smart as all of us."

Social skills

Two year olds can be very charming when they want to achieve something. As a matter of fact, when I told someone whose leadership skills I admire that I was writing an article on the leadership skills of two year olds, he chuckled and said, "Isn't that the truth? I've served in the military, worked for several different CEOs, and I swear I've never been bossed around more — than by my toddler." Then he smiled and

added, "And I've never been so happy to be bossed around by someone so little." How do they do it? The answer lies in one word that every true leader understands — *influence*.

There is much debate on whether leaders are born or developed. In actuality, not everyone in a leadership position acts as a leader. Some people are great managers and poor leaders. The difference lies in their social skills or their ability to influence people. True leadership in its purest form is about having followers; true leadership requires people. Those in leadership positions need to know the difference between managing and leading. You manage businesses and money, you train animals, and you *lead* people. John Maxwell puts it this way, "Managers can maintain direction, but they can't change it. To move people in a new direction, you need influence."

Toddlers learn early in life that if Mommy says, "No," they should ask Daddy or Grandma. While sometimes this works for them and sometimes it doesn't, what they are already learning is that people are different and what works with one person, doesn't work with another. True leaders pay attention to the individuals they are leading; they study them and learn what works with them, just like two year olds observe us and know who to hit up to delay nap-time a few more minutes or who will let them watch "Barney" one more time. Leadership is about influencing others to follow our lead. Nothing new can come without leadership and its influence.

Openness to change

Change and the challenges it presents can be difficult for even the most seasoned leader. Yet I believe there are lessons to be learned here from children: lessons in being positive, being attuned

to the emotions of others, and in encouraging out-of-the-box thinking. Having a positive attitude is contagious, and this is why many two year olds have their requests met with a "yes." If you are like me, you have difficulty meeting their enthusiastic request and that gleam in their eye with anything less than your own enthusiasm.

This also works for leaders faced with change. You want to create an environment of openness, give people the facts they need, allow them to ask questions, and give them straight answers. You communicate your excitement and listen to their concerns. Then you explain your excitement again!

Two year olds seem to read other peoples' emotions and develop a sense of timing for when to make their requests. Leaders need to follow this lead when implementing change and be sensitive to the emotions of others. All change begins with an ending. Change means that employees may have to give up something that is very important to them, and that may be hard. Watch for employees who seem to be having a hard time. Your awareness can help you provide them with more information and some much needed personal encouragement. This can help them to refocus and move forward to the change that is desired.

While everyone has to deal with change at one time or another, not everyone approaches it in the same manner. Trust your employees to use their creativity and imagination. Involve them when change is necessary, and you may find that they have a better solution than you had in addressing problems. Look for the best solution. Just as a two year old is constantly watching how the other kids are playing and what toys they are using, we learn from others. In fact, that is where we get some of our best ideas.

Loyalty — trust

A parent-child relationship in the early years is based on trust. Many would argue that learning how to trust is the most important lesson a parent or caregiver can teach a child in the first 18 months of life.

The foundation of trust is equally important in the lives of leaders. Followers expect to trust leaders and to be trusted by them in return. Craig Weatherup, CEO of PepsiCo, has said, "People will tolerate honest mistakes, but if you violate their trust you will find it very difficult to ever regain their confidence. That is one reason you need to treat trust as your most precious asset." John Maxwell, a leadership expert says that in order to build trust, a leader must be competent, connected, and a person of character. Trust occurs when people know they can count on their leader to do the right thing every time. You cannot break the trust of your people and expect to keep leading them as though nothing has happened. Trust is foundational to leadership.

Trust works both ways. Many leaders make the mistake of not trusting their employees. Why is that? Many employees are high-functioning adults who make important decisions in their home lives, effectively run their households, and manage their personal finances. Yet some leaders will question whether to involve their staff in decision making from ordering classroom supplies to hiring decisions. Leaders need to look at the knowledge and skill level of their employees and let them continue to grow and learn in the workplace. We must trust our employees and invite them to be our partners. Trusting others and being a trustworthy leader is critical to our success in the workplace.

Commitment to lifelong learning

Brain research has taught us that the first years of life are important learning years. We recognize how fast two year olds learn things and that their minds are like *sponges*. They use this continuous learning to their advantage in various situations.

True leaders are also committed to learning and applying what they have learned. A true leader never stops learning about people, about relationships, about their environment, about change, and even about leadership itself.

How do they find time to continue learning while leading and keeping up with all the daily demands on their time? The answer is that they must make learning a priority and give it some time each day.

A popular children's song describes how children learn: We learn big things a little at a time. Leaders can take a hint from that song. They should never stop reading, attending conferences and professional seminars, and talking with others. Just think, by devoting only 20 minutes a day to reading and learning you can learn a lot in a year's time. Leaders are readers!

Summary

While toddlers have a lot to learn I believe they also have a lot to teach us — if only we pay attention. Watching how they exercise leadership through persuasive communication, exceptional listening skills, reliance on teamwork, openness to change, appropriate social skills, maintaining trust, and a commitment to lifelong learning can teach all of us some big lessons.

For further reading

Adams, B. (2001). *The everything leadership book. The 20 core concepts every leader must know*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation.

Maxwell, J. C. (1998). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership: Follow them and people will follow you*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Neugebauer, B. & Neugebauer, R. (2003). *The art of leadership: Managing early childhood organizations*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, Inc.

Pike, B. (2005). "Are you a leader? Six skills and how to build them." *Discipleship Journal*. [Online] Available: www.dnaofrelationships.com/articles/sg_leader.html

Sciarra, D. J. & Dorsey, A. G. (2002). *Leaders & supervisors in child care programs*. Albany, NY: Delmar, Thomson Learning.

Resources

For more information on improving your listening skills try the following web site: www.businesslistening.com/
To read more online about leadership try the following:
www.art-of-leadership.com/