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why parents make  
great managers



# Why parents make great managers



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A few days ago I was running in Central Park as fast as I could, pushing myself hard, trying to beat my previous best time.

About halfway around the park I passed a mother walking with her two-year-old daughter. They were holding hands and she was moving at the pace of her child, about one step every five seconds. We were both enjoying ourselves, both in the moment, both focused on our task. But the contrast between us struck me.

I was the equivalent of an individual contributor in an organization. A specialist, striving to maximize my personal productivity and achievement. Specialist jobs are critical to the success of any organization, at all levels of the hierarchy. She, on the other hand, was the equivalent of a manager, a different and equally critical job in an organization.

Here's what occurred to me: if you want to find a great manager, hire a successful parent. It's the same job.

Think about it:

**Expressing care.** Successful parents love their children and often make sacrifices to do what's best for them. The best managers care deeply about their employees and will help them make the right choices for them, even if it's not in the manager's best interest. Great managers don't simply care about their employee's productivity. They care about their employees.

And employees who feel nurtured perform better. I remember one manager I had early in my career for whom I worked as hard as I could. I was his right-hand person. I felt so cared for by him that when I received a job offer from another organization, I asked him what he thought I should do. I trusted him completely. We discussed it and, ultimately, he advised me to take the job because it was in my best interest. We're still friends more than a decade later, and I would still do anything he asked.

**Practicing patience.** Let's face it, parenting can sometimes be excruciatingly boring. Successful parents have a tremendous amount of patience.

Great managers pace themselves to the unique needs and abilities of each of their employees. Great managers need tremendous patience because it's not about their individual success; it's about the contribution of their employees. They need to be motivated by the success of others and recognize that their employees' success is their success. Just like a parent.

**Leveraging uniqueness.** Great parents don't try to fit their kids into a box. They watch them carefully for signs of natural motivation and inclination and then try to provide opportunities for them to develop further into their areas of interest and passion.

Great managers know that the best thing they can do for their employees — as well as their companies — is get the right people in the right jobs. Employees' positions should take advantage of their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses.

Great managers notice their employees' personalities and put them in the environment where they will be most successful. I know a guy, we'll call him John, who was failing in his job. John loved being with people but he was a technologist and spent his days coding in a cubicle all day with very little contact with people. His manager noticed this and changed his role, putting him on a project team. Once John was collaborating with others, his performance shot up.

**Developing independent capability.** Great parents know they have only a few critical years to impact their children and then, sooner than they imagine, their children will be out of the house. So great parents strive to foster independent, capable children. Then, when their peers have more influence over them than their parents, they still make the right choices.

Likewise, the best managers build independent, capable teams. They coach them to think for themselves. And they don't try to hold on to their employees forever. Great managers know their job is to move their employees up and out of their teams into more challenging opportunities in other areas of the company while continuing to act as mentors and advisors.

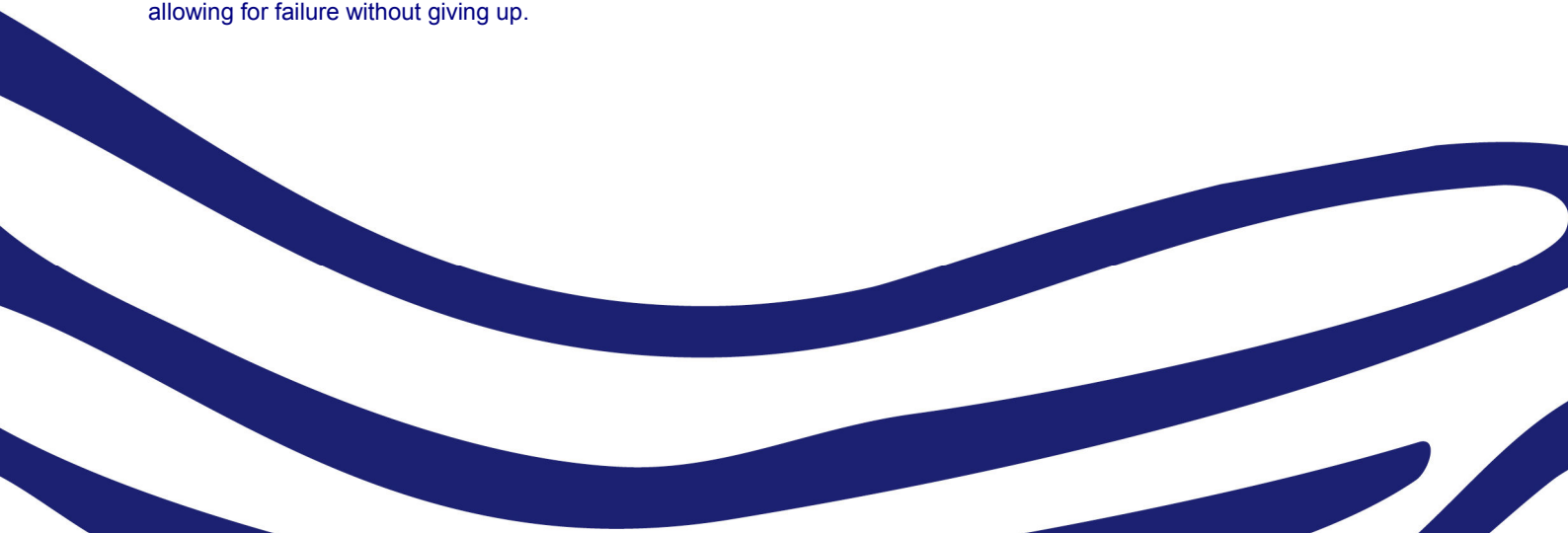
**Setting appropriate expectations and boundaries.** If children are unclear about what's acceptable and what's not, they'll freeze, unsure and insecure about whether they can act. The best parents set clear boundaries so their children feel secure and confident. And the best parents set appropriately high expectations so their children know to reach far, allowing for failure without giving up.

The best managers also have appropriately high expectations of their employees and set clear boundaries about what's acceptable and what's not. And their employees know it and work tremendously hard to live up to those expectations.

Management is a learned skill. And people who work hard to become better parents — by reading books, going to classes, experimenting, learning from mistakes — are also learning to become better managers.

Of course there are differences. The pressure for performance outcomes with a particular employee is often more immediate than with a child. And the relationship is shorter lived: how many of us expect to have the same employees for the next 50 years? Also, if it's not working out, you could fire an employee but it's unlikely you'd fire your child.

Still, at a time when many people are out of jobs, it's useful to notice and appreciate the ways in which they might be preparing for the next one. Maybe even by taking a two-year-old child out for a walk.





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