



## **Acting Like Adults**

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I am a big fan of documenting expected behaviors for a team. Reasons: 1) expectations are clearly stated, which improves performance and 2) it is easier to call out members who are not abiding by the rules.

Every team should spend time upfront to construct and document rules of behavior and engagement. Here is an example set of rules one of my teams came up with that helped us perform well over several years.

- **When in conflict we will try to see the situation from the other's perspective**
- **We will not leave our meetings with "silent nos"**
- **We will listen to each other but not beat dead horses (80/20 rule)**
- **We will build an environment of trust**
- **We will work together on a finite number of common goals**
- **We will be more inclined to ask for and offer help**

The team that created this set of rules was a high performing group of mature managers. In many offices and teams, there is an additional rule that would be most helpful. That is

- **We will try to remember we are all adults and act that way most of the time.**

It seems so simple, yet all of us have witnessed adults acting like children at work. If you have not seen this, check your pulse – you may be dead! The problem is that when we get into petty squabbles, the real issues are deeper than the symptoms that are driving us nuts on the surface. So those childlike behaviors come out all over the office.

Operating in close quarters, human beings have a remarkable talent for driving each other crazy. This problem is ubiquitous, no demographic is exempt from this kind of bad behavior. You can find petty squabbles and childish actions on the part of lawyers, doctors, construction workers, bellhops, auto mechanics, ballet dancers, rock bands, people on assembly lines, farmers, office workers, top managers, etc..

If you observe a typical work environment for just a couple days, you will see ample evidence of all the aberrant behaviors grade school teachers witness every day in the classroom and on the playground. Here are a few examples you will quickly recognize.

**Being selfish** – Kids like to hog the remote control. Well, so do adults (and don't deny it). At work, the idea is to cooperate and give as much or more than you get, but since equity is in the eye of the beholder most people have the perpetual feeling they are doing

more than their fair share. They put up with it for a while, but eventually the perceived inequity flares beyond the tolerance limit and fights erupt.

**Whining** – Oh boy, is that ever common in the working world. You would think some people are living in a prison camp the way they moan and cry about everything that is not up to their personal liking. We had a sign in one of my work areas that had a big red circle with a line through it and the word “Whining” in the center. The “no whining” symbol was actually useful in many cases. When people are called for whining, they tend to do less of it. Some offices have Olympic quality whiners. They need to be called on it.

**Shouting or grandstanding** – Sometimes the level of yelling in the workplace is amazing. In school, bullies find out that most kids do not have the courage to stand up to them when they bluster. It is a great trick to be able to out shout the competition and often get your way. Supervisors in many organizations have a habit of using a tone of voice that people interpret as yelling. I often find that word to be hard to define because it really is in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes a supervisor will be accused of yelling at an employee when he has not raised his voice at all. So, “yelling” does not always mean shouting, but it can mean that. I know one supervisor who really does yell at people – loudly. This kind of approach has no place in the working world, in my opinion, but there is still some debate.

There was an article in the Harvard Business Review indicating that for large scale change or innovation initiatives, a healthy dose of dissent is necessary. For example, it is said that Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer were famous for yelling at people. In my book on Trust, I share a cute story about Jack Welch. “One former GE executive who had been dressed down by Welch for daring to question his boss, admitted to the moderator of an Aspen Institute Seminar that Welch’s furious tirade ‘caused me to soil my pants.’ ” I think most of us would agree the bully approach is most often working at cross purposes to the organization’s best interest. Short term it may get compliance, but it destroys motivation.

**Hitting** – I guess this is not so often seen in the working world, but I have actually witnessed it in rare situations. Usually the hitting is with words rather than fists, but sometimes cat fights do erupt that involve pushing and shoving or an occasional slap in the face. Sometimes there is a type of sexual harassment that goes along with the physical contact sports being played by the children at work.

**Sulking** – This is so common that you will recognize it immediately. Watch for it whenever someone is called out for another one of the child like behaviors. The person will sulk and mope about for days because his or her ego has been bruised. This childlike behavior occurs because people just do not know what else to do, so they hang their head and sigh deeply that the world is so unfair.

**Passive Aggression** – We see this all the time when people do not feel motivated to do their work. They will go into a “Flight Controller Slowdown” and do only exactly what

they are told to do. Then they will sit and wait for more instructions. It is a way to get even for the sins done unto them by the big bad bosses. Kids do this to try to get out of doing their homework or eating their vegetables. Adults practice it to punish those in control. It is exactly the same driving force.

**Getting even-** Back stabbing or in some way paying back an individual or group for some perceived wrong doing only serves to escalate the hostility. The easiest way to witness this is in the e-mail grenades that go back and forth in every office in the world. Each time a note comes from the other person, the situation becomes graver and additional top brass are copied on the note until the final string becomes really laughable. It is the exact equivalent of a food fight in the Junior High School cafeteria. It gets messy very fast. The antidote is so simple. Don't take the bait!

There are probably dozens of other childlike behaviors you can witness every day in the working world. I think having a rule that indicates we are going to try to avoid this kind of thing is a good defense that can work. There needs to be a highly visible effort to act like adults and not resort to immature tactics to get our way. When you set that expectation as a leader, it flushes out the individuals who like to practice these techniques and they are far less disruptive. Soon the embarrassment of the whole thing forces the perpetrators to grow up and join the adult working world. Try it, and see if it helps improve things in your place of work.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on [www.leadergrow.com](http://www.leadergrow.com).

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