

Are You a Helicopter Boss?

The term "helicopter parent" is quite the ubiquitous expression today, especially in schools and educational institutions. A helicopter parent is a parent or primary caregiver who pays extremely close, almost obsessive, attention to his or her child or children. The intention of a helicopter parent is to protect their child or children from harm, upset, or failure — any harm, upset or failure — mental, emotional, physical, financial, academic, social or other-than-parent, authoritarian.

Helicopter parents are averse to allowing their children to fail, or make mistakes, and learn from their failures, *even when* their children are OK with making mistakes and experiencing failure in some way, shape or form. Helicopter parents hover closely overhead, always an arm's length away when their children need them...or not.

Helicopter bosses

The helicopter leader, manager or supervisor is one who is continually interfering with their direct reports, when not asked — constantly checking in, suggesting, fixing, educating, advising, improving, one-upping, interrogating, explaining, and otherwise "bothering" folks, when folks are not asking them for help or support.

Helicopter bosses often have some psycho-social-emotional need that prevents them from leaving others alone. Often this need is rooted in some sense of insecurity, or in a need for control and power, or a need for perfection, or even a need to be needed (i.e, seen, heard, acknowledged, appreciated, or loved). Interfering and bothering others is how they assuage one or more of these needs.

What folks really need

If you have the tendency to hover, butt in, interfere, bother and otherwise be annoying to your direct reports, maybe it would be wise to step back and reflect on why you choose to, or need to, hover, and then perhaps save that time and energy to see if you are providing employees with the type of workplace support they really, really need.

For example, one such workplace would be characterized as an hospitable environment that is free of gossip, bullying and needless politicking, where open and honest communication are "business as usual", where folks are counted upon to voice their complaints, tell you what they think, contribute, share and engage in the decision-making process and where folks have the opportunity to "opt in" to meetings where they have not been invited but feel they have something worthwhile to contribute.

Another example is a workplace where training, development and necessary resources are proactively provided to keep folks up to speed so they can effectively and efficiently meet their job requirements and where the recognition, compensation and reward package for their performance is fair.

Another example is a workplace where the temperature, lighting, sights, sounds and aromas are pleasing to the mind and the body.

Hovering is at its worst when folks are kept on an "electronic leash", 24/7, 365. Perhaps eliminate the leash. Set clear and explicit goals and a picture of how employees' work "fits" into the larger organizational picture and exhibit a trusting attitude where you believe in your employees and their commitment to work honestly, sincerely and self-responsibly trust them to be committed to meeting their goals without needing to monitor outside the workplace.

Finally, a workplace where one can both learn something new and teach someone something while at work, not be inundated with needless bureaucracy, procedures and red tape and where work and tasks are commensurate with folks' skill level, while providing a fair and consistent amount of stretching.

There's a wonderful Buddhist saying that applies to helicopter bosses: "Don't just do something, stand there!" A saying that is well worth hearing and following.

Questions for self-reflection

- Do you have a tendency to hover? What would your direct reports say? Would you ask them what they think?
- If you do have a tendency to hover, why do you think that is? What need does hovering meet? What does hovering "get you"? You, not them.
- When you were growing up, were your parents or primary caregivers "helicopter parents"?
- Could you stop hovering for one week and see what that's like for you? That is, are you "addicted" to hovering? Can you stop? What do you think would happen if you did stop? Do you know if that's the truth or a "story" you make up to justify hovering?
- Do you monitor your own life, both at work and outside of work, in a hovering fashion? Are you always "on" yourself? Are you able to leave yourself alone? Why or why not?
- Does your boss hover over you? If so, how is that working for you?

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