

## When Ego Is A Dirty Word

In Skyhooks' song of the 1970's "Ego Is Not A Dirty Word", they said, "If you did not have an ego you might not care the way you dressed", which associates a meaning of self-pride with the word "ego". Furthermore, the thesaurus links the word to "personality", "character", "self-esteem", and "self-image". So, there are very positive connotations related to the word "ego".



So when can it go wrong? Looking at the negative aspects of the word "ego", society has associated words like "self-centred", "stubborn", "conceited", "selfish", and even "aggressive" to describe an individual who has an unhealthy relationship with their ego. Typically, this is when a person's thoughts about himself/herself take constant priority over their thoughts about others. As Lucille Parker once said, "The nice thing about egotists is that they don't talk about other people".

In the office environment, for example, an egotist sees the acceptance of their ideas as validation of who they are as a person. This attachment to their idea provokes defensive and sometimes aggressive behaviour if the idea is not accepted by the organisation. Deepak Chopra ("These Seven Spiritual Laws of Success") writes about "The Law of Detachment", referring to the balance between the healthy passion associated with presenting an idea and the unhealthy attachment of needing to have the idea accepted by others. He suggests that being attached to a specific outcome will produce fear and insecurity at the possibility of its not happening. He goes on to compare the difference between being able to give oneself a pat on the back for coming up with the idea and the disempowerment and helplessness associated with requiring other people's pats on the back implied by have the idea accepted.

At home, also, a parent's ego can become a stumbling block to good communications. Imagine this scenario: Sally, having worked hard to complete her homework before dinner, is enjoying some relaxation time watching television. Her father has called to say that he is running half an hour late so dinner will be delayed. Rita, Sally's mother, says, "Don't just sit there watching television, set the table for dinner, please." Sally responds by saying, "Dad won't be here for another 30 minutes, and my favourite show will be finished in 10 minutes time. I'll set the table after that." What is Rita's dilemma? For some, the important issues are that Sally sets the table, and that the table is set before dinner. For those mothers, Sally's

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response is acceptable because it achieves both outcomes and demonstrates a trusting relationship between mother and daughter. For other mothers, however, the issue is about power, so that the expectation is that Sally will set the table NOW! This creates the potential for confrontation, regardless of when the table gets set, because the daughter and mother have different agendas.

In the first example the outcome was not about personalities and Sally was able to “negotiate” a solution that met her needs and her mother’s. There was also a trust between them that provided a safe environment in which Sally could air her opinion. Once Rita accepted the idea, the responsibility fell squarely on Sally’s shoulders to ensure that she followed through.

But both conclusions to the scenario raise another important point that is present in both the workplace and household environments. The point is whether managers (or parents) get their subordinates (or children) to perform duties by means of “compliance” or “commitment”.

Task completion by compliance normally means that there is an ever-present tension between the person with the power and those over whom the power is exercised. This is seen most obviously in the (unfortunately common) statement “Don’t argue, just do it!” So whilst the tasks get done, the manager (or parent) can never truly assess the level of support that they are receiving from their subordinates (or children). And, let’s face it, we are all human and, sooner or later, we will make a mistake. It is under those circumstances that we would like to rely on those around us to help us out.

The greatest benefit of having tasks completed through commitment is that it generates a higher level of “team spirit”, regardless of whether the team is in the home or at work. An important element of a team’s “buy in” to implementing an agreed solution to a problem is the enthusiasm and openness with which a manager (or parent) seeks the involvement of the whole team in the development of the solution. By being part of the decision-making process, all members of the team share the responsibility of ensuring that the solution is implemented successfully. The rewards of this approach are many-fold: better strategies unfold, greater loyalty is developed, and the responsibility of success is shared across the team, increasing the probability of achieving the desired result.

On the flip side, managers and parents who our bullies often find themselves in the lonely position of not knowing whether they will receive the support of those around them – wondering if there will be a “mutiny” (in the form of resignations of key staff, or children moving out of home) or even worse, the sabotage of a planned activity which will leave them exposed and embarrassed. The chances are high that these people are carrying forward issues relating to their perceived levels of acceptance earlier in their life. So they protect themselves, now, by being overly tough. In the words of Jerome K. Jerome, “Conceit is the finest armour a man can wear”.

To use your ego in a constructive way heightens your self-worth and self-esteem. But be wary of over-emphasising your self-importance to the detriment of the contributions being offered by the family or team around you. Hold your beliefs with passion but do not be attached to their acceptance by others.