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## Individual Centered

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### Individual Centered vs. System Centered

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A leader knows that a structure is only as stable as the foundation it is built upon, which for all organizations is the individuals that make it up. Thus, the organizations that do not continually try to strengthen their individuals will eventually collapse. Organizations are starting to realize this today, putting more effort into finding ways to keep their good people and continually train and develop them. However, most organizations today are still system centered. In other words, their focus is on maintaining the system and requiring the employees to adjust to the organization's system. In such organizations, resources and people are only as important as their ability to support the system.

An individual-centered structure is focused on the individuals in an organization. The system is built to support and help the individuals in the organization. It realizes that the stronger the individuals are, the more stable and productive the organization will be. This has been proven many times. Let me tell you a story of one organization, SEMCO, a Brazilian company, that made this change. In the 1990s the son of the founder, Ricardo Semler, took over and changed the structure from system centered to individual centered. He made the following changes:

1. The employees determined what type of work they performed. If no one wanted to work on something, they stopped doing business in that area.
2. Employees determined their own pay.
3. You were hired when someone in the company was willing to work with you.
4. Everyone had access to company finances and how much everyone else got paid.
5. There was a board seat reserved for anyone in the company that wanted to vote on company business at board meetings.
6. Employees determined who would be the managers, all the way up to the CEO.

These were radical changes at the time they were performed, and many people felt there was no way a company could operate like this. How can you allow employees to do whatever they want and choose their own salary? This would be like allowing kids in a family to make their own rules and do whatever they wanted! The common thought was they will do nothing and take all the company's money. Amazingly, despite what everyone thought would happen, these changes improved the performance and the success of the company. SEMCO did so well, if you invested a couple of thousand dollars into this company forty years ago, you would be a millionaire today.

Parents and teachers must make the same changes Ricardo Semler made with his company in their families and classrooms. The transition requires moving from an environment that expects the students and children to support the system to a structure where the system supports them. The transitions will create a system that respects the children and students and focuses on what they want.

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### **The Child-Centered Environment**

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Leaders know that everyone is valuable. In a company or family, removing one person from the environment will cause instability. Everyone has equal value. This equality causes a leader to treat each person with the same amount of respect for who they are. It doesn't matter their age, gender, or intelligence level. A leader doesn't discriminate.

I noticed a good example when I was spending time with my brother's family. His oldest son (who is four years old) received two shirts. He wore one, and his younger sister (two years old) wanted to wear the other. So, the mother put the shirt on her. When the son found out, he protested. He said that it was his shirt and he didn't want his sister wearing it. It was a tough dilemma for the parents, but the sister eventually won, and the son was told to let her wear it. For the next ten minutes, the son protested until the sister agreed to take it off.

Many parents and teachers have experienced a similar situation. If the son was a fifty-year-old man, the situation would have been very different. He would have been given more respect for his property. No one would force him to share. It is a big temptation when working with children to treat them as if they are second-class citizens. They are not given the same respect as adults.

In an individual-centered environment, a leader treats everyone with the same respect. Meaning, if my brother's older son didn't want the younger sister wearing the shirt, then the younger sister would not be allowed to wear the shirt. Here both opinions were respected as the parents respected their daughter's by asking the son if she could have it. Since it wasn't her property, the decision was up to the son, but her opinion was respected in the asking. Just as we do with adults, each person's opinions and decisions need to be respected. The only time this is not allowed is when a person's actions infringe on another person's health or safety. In the case of sharing, there's not always an easy solution for children, but if we don't respect them as individuals (their wants, needs, and property), they will never learn to respect themselves.

This type of treatment is a good example of when the environment is not individual centered; it is system centered. The system could be a family, class, or business, but in a system-centered environment, everything else is more important than the person. The person can only get their respect if their needs fit within the system.

Now, it is important to note here that providing a child with unlimited resources doesn't necessarily make the system individual centered. I have met many wealthy families and schools that provide many resources to their students/children, but the children are not

respected or cared for. This is what many people call a *family with everything but without love in the home*.

When an environment doesn't respect the child, it teaches the child to not respect other people. It teaches them that they do not have control over their own life. It teaches them that they have to follow the system and the system controls and governs what they do. This is detrimental in all families. This is known as thinking inside the box. It teaches the child to be a follower.

At first, this makes sense to most people, but then they start thinking and ask, "How can you treat a child like an adult when an adult is mature and a child is immature and doesn't have enough information to make the right choices?"

The answer is simple: in an individual-centered environment, we *respect everyone equally*, but we do not *treat everyone equally*. We treat each person based on their level of understanding and capability.

My sister explained this best to her kids when they requested equal treatment when getting Christmas gifts. She explained if you all want equal gifts, that means everyone gets the exact same thing. This means if I get your sister a princess dress, everyone will get a princess dress. This wasn't the answer they were expecting as my sister has one girl and four boys. However, she said, if you want to be treated fairly, then I will try to get the best gift for each of you, depending on what you will enjoy the most.

Leaders are very aware that no two people are equal. Due to everyone being different and having gone through different experiences in life, no two people will be the exact same or will have the exact same skill level in anything.

This mentality causes a leader to treat each person with the same amount of respect for who they are (fairly), but the leader does not treat each person the same (equally). The leader recognizes that each person wants to be treated differently depending on who they are.

For example, in my office, I respect all my employees. However, would I let all my employees borrow my car? The answer is definitely no! Some of them do not drive well, and the likelihood of them getting into an accident or causing damage to the car is high. This is the same with most things with my coworkers. I don't discuss the same things with all of them. To some, I talk about raising kids, and to others, I talk about their relationship with their spouse. It just depends on if they have kids or if they are newly married.

In an individual-centered environment, it is the same. Just because you respect each person and will be kind and understanding and supportive of everyone, doesn't mean you treat them the same or talk to everyone about the same things. I would let some employees work from home every day if they wanted to, and some I would always make them come to work.

This is not because I like them more or less, this is because I treat them based upon who they are. Some will work better when they consistently have to come into work.

Some children are more mature than others, some are more capable, some understand certain things in life more than others. Thus, depending on their capability, you should determine individually what you allow them to do, have access to, or talk with them about.

The following characteristics follow an individual-centered environment:

1. The purpose of the family/organization is to *help* the individual.
2. The organization/family is helping the student or child achieve what they want in life, not what someone else thinks they should want.
3. The individual is respected and treated fairly.
4. The individual has input on how the family/classroom is run.
5. The education that is taught is at the level of the individual and is being taught in a way that will best help the individual to progress.

Each person will have a different level of comfort in applying this **principle**. I encourage each teacher and parent to do what they feel comfortable doing. If this is a big change from how you usually approach your students/children, then start slow. Identify one thing you can do from the steps outlined in the rest of this section to move toward this way of treating people and see how it goes. Then gradually make more changes according to what you feel comfortable with.

Creating an individual-centered environment is not an easy thing to do. While the concept is simple, applying it is very difficult for most people, especially in a family or classroom with more children or students.

Steps to shaping teaching and parenting around the student:

1. Identify who the individual is.
2. Identify what the individual wants.
3. Enable the individual to shape the class or family.
4. Reduce direction and rules.

**For an explanation on each step, see the complete text (Available on Amazon).**