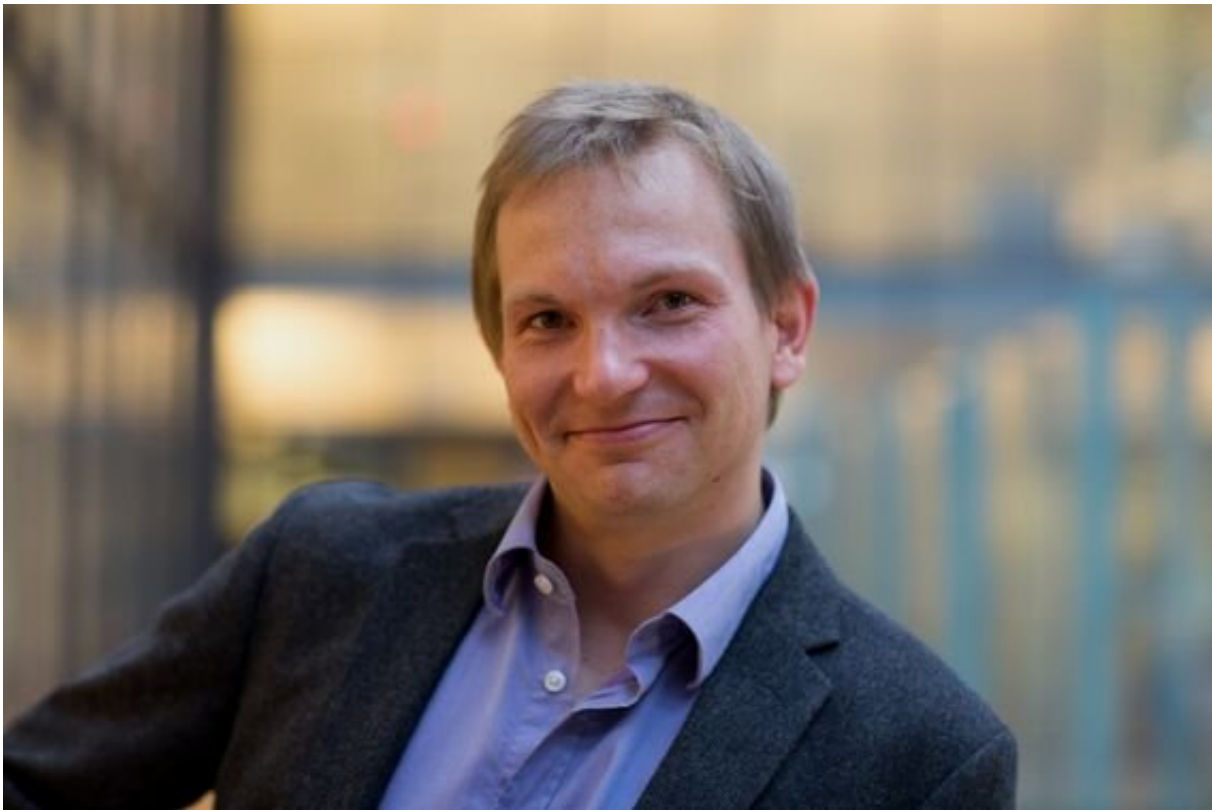


# Organizations that treat employees like children undermine their skill and well-being

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Peter Kenttä. Credit: Aalto University

Bosses and employees can engage each other in damaging "parent-child"-like relationships, according to research by Peter Kenttä. Smart management can avoid these roles, and handle them better when they unavoidably occur.

"The less hierarchical an organization is, the more responsibility people have for their own well-being, enabling them to steer and direct their own work." This is how Peter Kenttä, [doctoral candidate](#) at the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, summarizes his findings. He is defending his doctoral dissertation on well-being and interaction on Thursday, 8 October.

Kenttä carried out dozens of interviews at a Finnish technology company. He found that situations in which decisions were made, especially those affecting organization and management, were especially significant from the point of view of staff well-being.

According to Kenttä, people in organizations replicate the roles of a child, a parent, and an adult. Most of us respect interactions among adults in which matters can be agreed upon together. Taking on the position of a "parent" means taking on a position of power—and placing the other in the role of a "child."

"In these organizations and situations, the parents—the superiors—retain full control. The role of the child is very fragile and does not allow the skill level of the [employee](#) to develop," Kenttä says. "However, sometimes it might feel good to be in the role of a child, to some degree. For example, an employee can feel that it is not safe to make a decision on a matter."

## **Roles can be altered**

In his analysis, Kenttä used the conceptual framework of "transactional analysis," which originated in the field of psychotherapy. With the help of the framework, it is possible for an organization to change harmful interactions into interactions that strengthen staff well-being.

There are situations in an organization in which an employee inevitably

ends up in the role of a child. One example Kenttä highlights is evaluation panels, where the progress of a project is monitored and decisions are made on resources. The employee is left with the task of responding to the questions of the superiors, who take on the role of "parents."

Kenttä points out that even a child's role can be played with skill. For example, it is possible for the employee to offer different alternatives to the panel, instead of falling into a state of shame or helplessness.

"The child can give alternative solutions A, B, or C, which make it easier for the parent to decide. In addition, the child can also offer important information and understanding, which streamlines decision-making. In this way the child can make the parent's life easier."

If an organization's employees are constantly in the child role, they lack influence. According to Kenttä, the entire organization would benefit from greater equality in its interactions if the role of an "adult" is used as the starting point. The interaction would also be richer and more varied.

"If an employee has had enough, and hands in their notice, the superior is the one put in the position of the [child](#). The superior, however, can try and turn the conversation into one that is between two adults. In addressing these situations, it is crucial to discuss the quality and structure of the interaction, rather than discussing the issue itself, or the characteristics of the individuals," Peter Kenttä says.

Provided by Aalto University

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