

Article location:

January 16, 2006

## GET FAMILY FRIENDLY

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People quit when rigid workplace rules cause unbearable family stress. Would they leave your organization over work/family conflicts? Yes. Business magazines have spent plenty of ink in recent years on the importance of developing a “family-friendly culture.” But what does it really mean?

Employees are asking for a workplace that helps them balance the demands of their work and family lives, rather than forcing them to choose one over the other. Today and from now on, organizations that are not family-friendly will have a harder time engaging and retaining their talent.

Talented employees do not have to look far to find family-friendly employers who offer

- Childcare facilities or subsidies
- Flexible work schedules
- Job sharing
- Telecommuting
- Eldercare assistance
- Extended and creative maternity or paternity leave programs

If your organization has similar policies and perks in place, that’s great. But if not, you can take action yourself to become a more family-friendly manager. Ask your employees what will make their lives easier. Listen carefully for small things that you, their manager, might be able to do to help. Brainstorm with them to create innovative solutions to their work/family challenges.

### Flexibility Matters

You may feel restricted by your organization’s lack of family-friendly programs or policies. Yet you have tremendous opportunities to get family-friendly within your own work group. And much of what you can do as a manager costs you and your organization little or nothing.

Ernie was frustrated and exhausted trying to manage his work and family life. His wife also worked, and they had a six-month-old baby. Ernie wanted to partner with his wife in raising their child, so he began to flex his hours a bit to pick up the baby at childcare or take her to the doctor. His productivity and work quality remained high, but his hours dropped (from 55 to 45 a week) and looked somewhat erratic. The boss told Ernie that he simply had to return to his previous schedule—end of discussion. Even though Ernie tried to explain his needs, the boss had no time and no tolerance. Within two months Ernie had found a new job, one with a family-friendly culture and a boss who allowed him flexibility in his schedule.

Ernie’s boss lost a valuable employee, one who may be very costly to replace, because he did not take the time to listen and to design a family-friendly work solution with his employee.

Think flexibly the next time an employee asks you for different work hours or time off to help a spouse, parent, or friend. Think about the real costs of saying yes. Will productivity suffer? Will you set a dangerous precedent? Will

that employee begin to take advantage of you? It is more likely that your employees will applaud your open-mindedness and willingness to help a valued employee in a time of need. Remember to set clear expectations for your employees' results and hold them to those results. Then you will have room to flex when it matters.

### Support Helps

Some managers mistakenly think that they should clearly separate themselves from their employees' personal lives. You have much more to gain by showing your interest in their lives outside of work.

I was so excited about my daughter's singing debut at her high school. She had been taking vocal lessons; she had developed a strong, beautiful voice, and that day was her chance to show it off. She would sing the "Star Spangled Banner" (without accompaniment) during the all-school pep rally at 1 P.M. My boss was excited for me and said, "No problem," when I asked him if I could go watch her. But here's the best part. Upon my return, with videotape in hand, he asked me how it went and asked if I would show him the tape. It was such a small thing but meant so much to me. I proudly showed him the video and beamed as he praised my daughter. He showed support in so many ways that day.

Here are some other ways managers have shown support:

- Allowing employees' children to come to work with them occasionally.
- Driving to an employee's house to be with her and her family following a death in the family.
- Accompanying employees to their children's ball games and recitals.
- Inviting an employee and his parents, relatives, or children to lunch.
- Researching eldercare alternatives for an employee who needs help with aging parents.
- Sending birthday cards or cakes to employees' family members.
- Setting up special e-mail and resource areas on the company intranet for employees' children.
- Locating resources (the company lawyer) for an employee struggling with the health insurance company.

### Creativity Counts

"We've never done that here." "The policies don't support that." These are common excuses among managers who don't know their real power or are afraid to test the limits of the family-friendly (or unfriendly) rules. Sure, there are constraints and policy guidelines in most organizations. And you have to play by those rules to some degree. But often it pays to get creative on behalf of your employees and their needs.

There was no such thing as job sharing in this organization. We have a long history and cemented policies. After the birth of our children, another director and I decided to go to our boss and ask about the possibility of sharing one job. The job was high level and critical to the organization, so at first there was tremendous concern about even trying it. But our boss took a risk and gained approval for a six-month test period. That was 12 years ago and we have been sharing the job effectively ever since. The creativity and flexibility of our boss allowed us both to balance family and work. We are tremendously grateful and loyal employees.

Job sharing is just one example of a creative solution to a challenging situation. Here are some others. Which might work for you?

- If employees must travel on weekends, offer something in exchange, such as comp time or allowing family members to travel with the employee.
- When your employees travel to areas where they have family or friends, allow them to spend extra time with those people at the beginning or end of the trip.
- Give your employees a "floating" day off per year to be used for a special occasion. Or suggest they go home early on their birthdays or anniversaries.
- When an employee asks about working from home, really explore that possibility. What are the upsides? Downsides? Get creative about how that might work to benefit both the employee and your team.

The best kind of creativity is collaborative. Remember to brainstorm a list of ideas with your employees and be continuously open to new and innovative ways to balance family and work.

There are positive pay-offs for your efforts, including increased productivity and the competitive edge that a loyal and committed workforce will provide.

*Some concepts and strategies are taken from Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay, Berrett-Koehler 2005.*