

Article location: <http://www.fastcompany.com/resources/talent/bksje/041006.html>

April 10, 2006

## Give Employees the Space They Need

By [Beverly Kaye](#) and [Sharon Jordan-Evans](#)

If you've raised a teenager (or remember being one) you know this phrase: "Give me some space!" It's uttered by those who feel fenced in, over-controlled, or frustrated by lack of power over their own situations. It's worth remembering that phrase in work settings too, because your best employees want elbow room — and they'll leave you if they don't get it.

How space-friendly are you? Read the following requests from talented employees and imagine you are their boss. To which of these requests would you say, "No way"? To which would you say "Yes" or "Let me see what I can do"?

- I want to come in half an hour earlier and leave half an hour earlier three days a week.
- I want to get this task done in a brand new way.
- I want to complete the first five steps of this project before you review it.
- Instead of taking a class, I found a mentor to teach me that skill.
- I want to put my vacation pictures on my office walls.
- I want to work from home two days a week.
- I plan to work on Saturdays for a few weeks in order to get the project done on time. I want to bring my well-trained dog to work with me on those days.
- I want to wear casual clothes to work, rather than a business suit.
- We've always done these projects solo, but I want to put together a team this time because I believe we will do the job better and more quickly.
- I want six weeks off work (without pay) to begin building my own home.
- I want to bring my new baby to work for the first six weeks of her life.

How many "No Ways" did you have? In some organizations every one of these requests would receive a positive response. But the opposite is true in far too many. And those organizations have trouble retaining talent.

So how can you give employees the space they need? Here are a few ideas.

### Telecommuting

Telecommuting is here to stay. As a recent article in CFO magazine explained:

*"Not everyone agrees on just what constitutes a teleworker. The International Telework Association & Council defines one as an employee who works at home, at a client's office, in a satellite office, a telework center, or on the road at least one day per month. Even restricting the definition to an employee who works from home at least one day a month, there are 23.5 million teleworkers in the United States. Most corporations with large numbers of teleworkers report productivity increases, not declines. 'A number of companies fear their workers will be at home with their feet up in front of the TV, and that's just not the case.'"*

What if your organization does not allow it? One manager said, "My company had never allowed

telecommuting, and I believed it probably never would. One of my top employees asked me if she could work from home two days a week, and my immediate response was no. A month later she sadly handed in her resignation and said she had found an employer who would allow her to telecommute. I simply could not afford to lose her, so I went to my boss and asked if we might bend the rules on a trial basis, offer her telecommuting two days a week, and see how productive she was. She stayed with us, increased her actual productivity by 10% and is a grateful, loyal employee. Since then we have loosened our policy substantially and consider telecommuting on a case-by-case basis for any employee who requests it.”

## **Dressed for Success**

We have all read about the high-tech environment in which people with creative, brilliant minds dress in all kinds of bizarre outfits. Some wonder if it is appropriate or professional or conducive to productivity. The results seem to speak for themselves. Just take a look at successful companies like Microsoft, where there are no dress codes in many departments. How productive have they been over the years? Managers in those environments say that their employees often work long hours (sometimes 70-hour weeks) by their own choosing, as they strive to complete a project or get a new product out the door. Allowing them to dress as they wish seems a small concession, considering the commitment and high productivity.

Think about where you can offer flexibility in dress. Is it casual Fridays? Summer attire? Different dress codes for those who never see a customer? Challenge the rules a bit. If business-wear is truly necessary, then you will want to support the rule—but think about the requirements realistically and with a creative eye. It is truly amazing how favorably many employees view a flexible dress code.

## **Autonomy**

Giving autonomy requires that managers let go and trust their talented employees to manage and continuously improve their work -- without micromanagement.

The retail giant Nordstrom knows a lot about giving its employees space and empowering them to make decisions and manage their own work. In fact, managers credit their corporate culture for one of the highest retention rates in the retail industry. The primary rule, stated in Nordstrom’s employee handbook, is this: Use your good judgment at all times.

Because workers are empowered to make sure the customer is satisfied, Nordstrom customers typically experience remarkable service. The employee who ironed the new shirt a customer needed for a meeting and the one who gift-wrapped items a customer had bought at Macy’s are both examples of how Nordstrom employees provide great customer service. They have the space to manage their work in their own unique and creative ways.

## **Flexible Work Schedules**

All the research points to the fact that emerging workers (of any age) want flexibility in work schedules. So what are organizations doing in response to these wants? According to Hewitt Associates, a human resources consulting firm, in 1990 about half of all employers studied offered some type of flexible scheduling. A decade later it was 74%.

Tasked with building a top-notch, diverse workforce, the Office of Personnel Management offers alternative work schedules as a way for federal agencies to increase productivity, lure talent away from the private sector and keep workers happy. With the program, agencies can scrap traditional eight-hour days and 40-hour weeks in favor of arrangements tailored to individual needs. (That’s according to Federal Computer Week, March 2004, "Flextime: Not a Bad Stretch" by Megan Lisagor.) By striking a better balance on the personal/professional seesaw, workers are expected to achieve greater success on the job.

## **The Bottom Line**

Job sharing, flextime, telecommuting, and designing one’s own work space are not accommodation or pampering. They are ways to meet your business goals. That means listening to what people want, going to

bat for their needs, and ultimately giving them options and opportunities to do things differently. Truly listen to the unique requests your employees bring you. Make an honest attempt to win flexibility and improved work conditions for your people.

Space to play, have a good time, take breaks, celebrate successes, creatively attack problems -- all of this makes for a culture of engagement and retention. Your reward will be loyalty and commitment from your best people.

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

---

Got something to say? [Join the discussion!](#) [1]

---

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.fastcompany.com/fasttalk/forum.html?f=334>