Helping Employees Navigate Work and Personal Life

Research shows that employees who feel that their personal and family priorities are accepted and acknowledged by their managers and their organizations are more engaged and more productive at work. In this era of global competition, where significant numbers of employees are feeling chronically overworked at least part of the time, how do you help your employees find ways to remain effective and involved in both their work and personal lives? Following is information on how to do that.

Your role as a manager
One of the challenges of managing productively is working to align business needs and employees' individual needs -- to get high-quality, efficient work from motivated teams of employees, while at the same time creating a workplace that recognizes and supports employees' needs to feel satisfied and productive in their personal lives.

Over the last 10 years, work-schedule flexibility has emerged as a critical issue for employees. Many younger workers make decisions about whether to stay with a company based on their ability to balance work with outside interests. Workers with dependent care responsibilities, whether for children or older family members, make the same decisions based on their ability to work and take care of family needs.

You play a key role in helping employees stay productive and committed -- by providing resources and support so that employees are able to effectively navigate work-life priorities and responsibilities. You have the ability to make this important issue better or worse for your employees. “Today,” says Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of Families and Work Institute, “employees and employers are working together to find new ways to restructure the workplace in unique ways to give people the flexibility they need and to improve bottom line business measures like productivity and retention at the same time.”

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It’s not your job to solve your employees’ personal and family problems, but given the extent that employees have demands and priorities outside of work that affect their work, you have an interest. That interest might lead you to work with one employee to design a work schedule that allows him to get his work done and drive an older relative to medical appointments at the same time that you are working with another employee to ensure she can attend evening classes for the...
degree she is pursuing. In another instance, it might lead you to refer an employee to your organization’s employee assistance program (EAP) for help. Or, it may simply lead you to make sure your employees know that you are aware of their commitments and priorities outside of work.

Here are some tips on helping employees navigate work and personal life:

• *Find out about your organization’s policies and programs that relate to work-life issues.* This article is made available through your organization’s work-life program or EAP, which can help you and your employees with a wide range of work, personal, and family issues. Familiarize yourself with the program and keep brochures or contact information on hand to give to employees.

• *Find out about your organization’s flexible work and time-off policies.* Find out how to handle requests for special schedule variations and where to get answers to specific questions about flexible work hours, part-time work, working from home, and other flexible work arrangements. Talk with other managers to share ideas and suggestions on how to make these programs work for your department.

• *Treat each employee as an individual.* Demonstrate to your employees that you will give all of their requests fair and reasonable consideration whether those requests are family related or not. But also make it clear that your decisions will weigh both the employee’s and the organization’s needs and that employees can help by thinking through the business implications of their requests.

• *Find out what people need by having regular check-in meetings with each of your direct reports.* Use the time to find out what is getting in the way of their work. Be open to hearing about and discussing issues outside of work that may be having an impact on the employee’s performance. Keep in mind that individuals have different needs and priorities and that sometimes the focus of where time needs to be spent can shift, depending on what is occurring in someone’s work or personal life.

• *Have career conversations with employees.* Share your own career story. Be open to talking about career-life issues and needs. Recognize that career-life needs change throughout the course of people’s careers and may be different at various life stages.

• *Let employees know that it’s OK to ask for help, especially during a work crunch or times of overload.* Make it clear to employees that they can ask for help at times of personal overload, too. It’s natural to worry that asking for help will be seen as a sign of weakness or a lack of commitment to the job. It’s your job to get your people past that worry and to a point where they trust you and other team members enough to ask for help when they need it.

• *Show an interest in employees’ lives.* Make time for personal talk at the beginnings and ends of meetings or at other quiet times. Don’t pry if an employee is
reluctant to share personal information, but make it clear that you’re interested if
the person wants to talk about his life outside of work. In an environment of
open, two-way communication, trust flourishes and you are more likely to find
out about important personal and family issues that may be affecting an
employee’s work. If you know about those issues, you may be able to help.

• **Focus on outcomes rather than means.** A focus on hours worked or “face time” in the
  office rather than work accomplished can lead you to miss opportunities for
  improving work-life balance for your employees. Be open and willing to try new
  ways of working. If your team’s work objectives can be met (and perhaps better
  met) with employees on different schedules, give it a try. You can always return
to former routines and schedules if it doesn’t work out. Talk with your human
resources (HR) representative to work out the specifics of what you can and can’t
do with employee schedules.

• **Work with the employee to figure out how the work will get done when she needs time off**
or flexibility in her schedule for personal matters. When an employee asks for
time off or an adjusted schedule in order to deal with a personal or family issue,
the manager often sees it as a yes or no question. You say “no” and the personal
problem is the employee’s to deal with. You say “yes” and the work problem is
yours. But a balanced approach is to acknowledge that both the personal and work
priorities are important. It’s up to the employee to find the best way to deal with
the personal issue. You should expect the employee to help you figure out how
the work will get done. If the situation is urgent, review it later when you both
have more time and can think together about how to deal with the work the next
time. Involve the team, too, in coming up with backup plans for those days when
an employee is out, and expect the team to be prepared to cover when someone
isn’t there.

• **Encourage your team to look for ways to redesign and streamline work.** Research shows
that 60 percent of employees often have trouble focusing on their work because
they have so many different tasks to accomplish. Focus your team on process
improvements and ways to eliminate low-value work whenever possible.

• **Cross-train team members.** It’s a valuable way to provide backup when an employee
has to be absent due to personal responsibilities.

• **Make sure employees are aware of your organization’s work-life program or EAP and
encourage them to use it.** The program that provided this publication can help
employees find child care and services for older relatives and can provide expert
information and coaching on parenting issues (from infants to teenagers), stress
management, budgeting and debt issues, children’s school issues, taking evening
classes while working, and other life challenges and transitions. The program’s
Web site provides a wealth of information and resources.

• **Set an example with your own behavior.** Become familiar with your work-life
program by visiting the Web site and calling a consultant yourself. Be conscious
of the signals you send with your work schedule and work habits. Take your vacation time and encourage your employees to take their vacation time also. Avoid contacting employees during nonworking hours unless it is absolutely essential.

- **Model making time for your personal life.** When you take time for personal or family needs, don’t hide it from your employees. It helps to show them how you balance your work and private life. But be aware that your work and personal needs and how you address them may be very different from those of your employees.

- **Think about how you got to where you are professionally.** It’s likely in your own career that you’ve taken detours and taken advantage of flexible work options to get where you are. Remember that your employees need the same flexibility in navigating personal and work commitments and in building their own careers.

You’ll get real satisfaction as a manager from helping employees find ways to navigate what’s important to them outside of work with their work responsibilities. Your organization will benefit, too, and so will your team’s productivity and morale.

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