

# What to do when your boss isn't very family-aware

A few weeks back, I suggested we come up with a more or less regular venue for exploring issues about the family that arise at work.

A lot of folks seemed to think that was a good idea. Being a kind of conservative guy when it comes to launching new ventures, I decided to start on a small scale. So I asked some of the most vocal respondents if they'd be part of a family/work life e-mail group. Their job would be to come up with questions about places where work and family intersect. I would send the questions to everyone in the group, and they could shoot me back some answers.

Almost before the thing was launched, I got a question from a reader who felt she had nowhere to turn for help with her problem at work. Here's what our anonymous reader, who we'll refer to as LM, wrote to me:

**"My question is: How do you get your boss to realize that he/she stresses out his/her employees by not being more understanding about families and kids?"—LM**

I sent this out to the e-mail group. What came back was, I think, some pretty thoughtful responses. Some were signed, some not, but all were worth considering. Here's the first:

"Oooooooooo ... let's just start with a toughie. Well, short of values and maybe a personality transplant, I'd do my best to formulate a little speech stressing that we all are different and some of us are not as productive as we could be when our lives are out of balance. Some folks on the other hand seem to be able to compartmentalize things in such a way that they seem to be able to disassociate the home stuff and really focus regardless. I fear it is partially a gender issue. Whatever LM does she can't make the boss wrong. She needs to couch it so that she needs him to help her with this issue so she can do a better job."—Anonymous

Another one of my correspondents emphasized the need for the "special situations" behavior to work both ways. Meaning, you recognize my family needs, and I'll be there when you need someone to come through in a pinch at the office.

This person wrote:  
"My feelings on this issue boil down to this: An organization can spout all the family-friendly rhetoric it wants, but unless an employee's direct report deals with child-care issues on a daily basis or has a son or daughter that does, the theory won't be put into practice. Personally, I



DAN COOK

have tremendous flexibility where I work. If I wish to take a morning off to volunteer in my child's classroom, my supervisor is understanding and allows me to make up the time during the evening or on another day. It positively affects my job satisfaction and productivity and when I'm asked to stay until midnight during the legislative session to respond to a legislative inquiry, I'm much more inclined to say 'yes.' It all evens out."—Nina

Another reader urged people not to forget that we work so we can pay the bills. And that family-friendly policies can be profitable ones, too.

This person wrote:

"An important and key argument when discussing any work/life issue is that successful programs make money.

"For instance, a lactation room can certainly relieve stress on a new mom wondering where she can express breast milk while working, but is that enough to justify the dollars spent on creating a room and allowing an employee time for that chore? It should be, but work/life issues are generally seen as 'feel good' issues, with little bottom-line justification.

"Employees will have a much better chance of getting a company's buy-off and participation if dollar value can be demonstrated. In the case of lactation rooms, the following information was easy to find on the internet, and showed (dramatically) that providing the facility was worth the time and money invested:

- "27 percent less absenteeism for working mothers who continue nursing (study done by UCLA School of Nursing).

- "John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company estimates their lactation program has saved the company \$60,000 since 1993 (as a result of earlier returns from maternity leave and decreased time off for working mothers caring for sick children).

- "Women return sooner from maternity leave if they know there is support for them to continue nursing. Women who have this support also demonstrate higher productivity, job satisfaction and morale. Supporting nursing mothers also

enhances the reputation of employers and promotes a family-friendly workplace' (USDA Secretary Dan Glickman, Jan. 1998).

- "Los Angeles Dept. of Water and Power estimates it saves \$2.50 for every \$1 invested in lactation support.

- "A CNN report stated that for every \$1 invested in breast-feeding programs, companies get back \$2 to \$4.

"Even the most old-fashioned employer can see the values, rather than feeling like they're listening to complaints or requests for special favors. Making a business case works. It took six months of convincing, but a lactation room was built—and within two years was doubled in size to accommodate use!

"It's still a touchy subject, though, so please don't identify me with my company. People are uncomfortable with personal issues, which is why the room is hidden

behind an unsigned door, and women are not told about it when they go on maternity leave. It's been word-of-mouth (though that's going to change, hopefully). All the more reason to have a strong business case, as hard figures reduce the automatic 'it's your personal problem' or 'queasy' reactions.

"Thanks—this is a good issue to investigate. In this changing world, where our many roles are merging into an overall life experience vs. the compartmentalized reality we used to manage, work/life issues are going to be more and more critical."—Anonymous

Other responses reminded me that it isn't just moms and dads who need special consideration.

One person wrote:

"In general, companies have done well with what used to be another difficult topic of conversation and education: cultural diversity. I have no specific solutions to LM's issues, however, employers and employees do need to be educated about family diversity and to develop tolerance. A family can be one person, a parent and child(ren), two parents and child(ren) or even an adult helping to take care of elderly parents. Each type of family faces its own challenges in integrating some sort of family life around work.

"Perhaps LM's company has raised the issue of cultural diversity. If so, then start bringing up the issue of family

diversity and its similarities to cultural diversity and in particular the issue of tolerance, in this case, for each individual employee's family style."—Andrea

Then came a reply that I'd been expecting—a note from an advocate for single employees without kids who feel that subtle pressure from the boss to put in long hours "because we don't have a life."

I remember those days before I had kids. Let's see, there was softball, basketball, racquetball, club hopping, playing in a rock band, camping...

Well, we'll let this reader say it in her own words:

"I want to offer another perspective—confidentially/anonymously, please.

"A lot of employers have changed vacation and sick leave to annual leave—then you use it for whatever ... sick, coaches' or teachers' conferences, or staying home with a sick child. I think that's a great solution to maintaining balance and being fair to nonparents and their obligations.

"I am bothered, though, by the part—and assumption—that reads, 'single people' (really should read nonparents and noncustodial parents—a growing segment of the population) 'can work all hours at all times at a moment's notice.'

"Parents, not just employers, often make that assumption and it isn't fair. Nonparents have loves and pets and personal commitments and evening work commitments and volunteer commitments and hobbies and yes, family obligations. Some are chosen deliberately, instead of parenthood.

"It shouldn't be assumed, as it often is, that nonparents should have to pick up the slack, work late, be the team player, etc. to accommodate parents' choices ... particularly when talking about college-educated, well-heeled two-income parents or high one-income families with a stay-at-home parent (vs. struggling single moms). They chose a lifestyle, are not necessarily struggling financially, and it isn't fair to expect nonparents to always accommodate their choice/lifestyle priorities first.

"Just a dissenting voice, and yes, a feminist—who has only a parent of grown children in my office, but who hears a lot from nonparents, resentful of sometimes 'exclusive perks' of parents in the workplace."—Anonymous

Well, we're out of room again. Let me know what questions you'd like our little think tank to tackle next. And if you want to be part of the family/work life e-mail group, just send me your address. I'm at dcook@bizjournals.com

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