

The Supervisor's Role in Work/Life Balance

Today's employees typically balance multiple work and family roles, which may include employee, caregiver to children, caregiver to aging parents and spouse/partner. These different roles place a variety of demands on employees, and the demands often conflict with each other. The conflict between work and family roles has been shown to reduce life satisfaction and job satisfaction and increase job distress, absenteeism, thoughts of leaving the job and depression.

Clearly, organizations want to prevent these kinds of outcomes as they seek to retain quality employees in a tight labor market. In fact, many organizations have responded to these issues by implementing a variety of "family-friendly" programs or policies, such as child-care and elder-care services, flexible scheduling, telecommuting and parental leave.

Supervisors as "gatekeepers"

Supervisors play a critical role in ensuring the effectiveness of these work/family or work/life initiatives. You may be considered the "primary implementor of work and family policies," according to organizational researchers Ellen Kossek, PhD, and Cynthia Nichol, PhD. Your organization may offer a variety of formal work/family policies or programs "on the books," but if you send the message to your employees—either intentionally or unintentionally—that they shouldn't use these policies, they generally won't. Your attitudes and actions should not only allow but also encourage employees to make use of work/family policies.

Even if your organization does not have formal work/family policies, you have the power to create a "family-friendly" work environment for your employees, which can benefit employees and the entire organization. Research has shown that people dealing with multiple work and family demands who have a supportive supervisor enjoy the following attributes:

- higher job satisfaction
- higher commitment and loyalty to the organization
- lower levels of burnout and less conflict between work and family roles

How to be a supportive supervisor

Be flexible.

Flexibility can be "day to day" and "informal" and thus not require a formal flextime policy. Employees who are dealing with multiple work and family demands may face planned and unplanned family circumstances, so flexibility can be invaluable to them. To provide the flexibility employees need, you might:

- Offer some degree of schedule flexibility to accommodate employee needs.
- Allow employees to leave work early or come in late on occasion.
- Allow for occasional days off to deal with family emergencies.
- Allow employees to take important phone calls about family issues at work or get them phone messages as quickly as possible.
- If feasible, allow employees to work at home from time to time.

Be sensitive to employees' family responsibilities.

You can display sensitivity by taking specific actions or by having a generally positive attitude toward family issues or concerns within your work group:

- Communicate with your employees about their work and family situations.
- Regularly ask employees about their families and any special circumstances that they are facing.
- Offer emotional support. For example, extend empathy or sympathy to subordinates who are dealing with difficult emotional issues.
- Share stories or advice based on your own caregiving experiences.
- Allow employees time to talk with other employees who are facing similar situations.

You have the opportunity to create a work group, department and organization that places a high value on family, which will allow your organization to retain quality employees who are dealing with work and family issues. Creating a more “family-friendly” working environment will benefit not only the employees you supervise, but also your entire company.

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