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Many Managers Must Make Tough Choices on Flexibility

By Sue Shellenbarger
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

From The Wall Street Journal Online

IT WAS THE KIND of management decision Jim Quesnel dreads.

Sitting before him in his office was an anxious employee, an operator in the 500-employee office-supplies plant Mr. Quesnel runs for Avery Dennison in Chicopee, Mass. He was asking to leave his day-shift job four hours early the next day to attend his son's baseball playoff game.

Mr. Quesnel, father of a daughter, 25, and a son, 17, could relate. He hates missing his son's baseball games. As he listened, an image of himself in the stands, watching his son, popped into his head. Missing a game means missing a part of childhood "that's not going to come back," he says.

But the best person to fill in for the employee, his night-shift counterpart, was on vacation. And Mr. Quesnel couldn't say yes without hampering the work of six other employees and risking disrupting production.

Decisions like this have gotten harder for bosses on factory and plant floors. It's hip these days to be flexible and responsive to employees' desire for life balance. Bosses who are get good ratings on employee surveys and, at some companies, are rewarded with bigger raises. Indeed, for managers of people in information, knowledge and some service jobs, being flexible has gotten easier, as technology allows people to work anytime, anyplace.

BUT ARGUABLY, the trend in factories, plants and warehouses is in the opposite direction. Staffing cuts have made fill-ins scarce; rock-bottom inventories make swift shipments essential. Employees there remain as firmly rooted to the shop floor as their predecessors in the Industrial Revolution.

"If a \$500,000 machine doesn't run today because an employee is out, and the parts from that machine are due to ship tomorrow, then that shipment may not be made or may be expedited at high cost," says Marco Budny, general manager and executive vice president of Crest Products, Lexington, Ky.

Of course, few managers would expect someone with a true crisis, such as a medical emergency or a death in the family, to keep working. The 1993 Federal family-leave law requires employers to allow 12 weeks of unpaid leave in some such cases. But less crucial matters force a choice between two legitimate needs.

Good managers may empathize but be unable to say yes. Mr. Quesnel had to reject the father's request. The man had violated the plant's informal "no-surprise" policy, asking workers to inform managers of time-off needs as far in advance as possible. "He didn't give us enough time to react," Mr. Quesnel says.

Still, the decision "didn't feel good," Mr. Quesnel says. The employee was disappointed and upset. "If this kind of decision was more the rule than the exception, I really couldn't face myself every day," Mr. Quesnel says.

Managers often face consequences no matter what they decide. Mr. Budny oversees 168 people who work shifts covering 24 hours, five days a week, making parts for such customers as Ford Motor. Good attendance is crucial. Idling machinery for absences can mean the whole plant has to work on a Saturday. "One doesn't like to shut Ford down," Mr. Budny says.

Thus, he cringed when a supervisor, a single dad, asked if he could leave early periodically for his son's T-ball games.

"In your mind you're saying, 'Why am I put in this position?' " Mr. Bundy says. "But knowing his relationship with his son, it was difficult, if not impossible, to say no. Had I been in that position, it would have been a struggle for me."

He still remembers how bad he felt when work forced him to miss a grade-school event with his son, now 14. And he was impressed that the father showed concern for his co-workers.

MR. BUDNY AND OTHER managers and employees covered for the father. But Mr. Budny worried about fairness issues. And not having the supervisor on the floor delayed solving a few problems. "During times when people were scrambling, it would have been helpful to have him here."

The managers I interviewed said good workplace practices avert most dilemmas. At DuPont's DeLisle, Miss., pigment plant, Plant Manager Aldo Morrell gives workers a voice in picking shift schedules and allows employees to swap work time, with supervisors' approval. All the managers hold employees responsible for trying to find solutions to problems caused by schedule changes.

Even the best practices can't erase all conflicts, however. Mr. Morrell recalls one of his toughest decisions: a request by a field operator for a change in her starting time. She couldn't find child care before her early-morning shift. Mr. Morrell, a father of three, understood; his wife has held full-time jobs in the past.

But this woman's job, keeping machinery running smoothly, made her presence essential. "I had to tell her we were sorry, we couldn't make that work," Mr. Morrell says. He was relieved when she found family members to fill the child-care gap.

In time, good communication heals wounds. After Mr. Quesnel turned down the dad, he sat with him, listening and explaining the decision and his importance in the plant. "At the end of the conversation, he was disappointed but he understood," Mr. Quesnel says. "He went home and thought about it. And he ended up circling back to me a week later, expressing his thanks" for the time spent.

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