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Treat Employees Equally And Reap the Rewards

By Bob Rosner , Allan Halcrow , and Alan Levins

Max is Julie's prize teddy bear. He has his own wardrobe in her closet, his own place at the kitchen table and a favorite chair for watching TV. Julie even buys Max a seat when they fly. So if Julie asks for a day off because Max needs her, would you let her take it?

Before you answer, consider some other situations. What if Max were her golden retriever? What if Julie is a Meals on Wheels volunteer and Max is a housebound elderly man? Would you give Julie the time if Max were her five-year-old nephew? Her grandfather? Her boyfriend? Her 10-year-old son?

These situations are at the center of workplace skirmishes that threaten to erupt into full-scale warfare because most employers will give Julie the time only if Max is her son, and employees without children resent that. "Our company says it wants to help balance the demands of work and personal life," John says, "but they seem to think that personal life is the same as children. I'm tired of watching parents walk out of here at 5 p.m. to pick up their kids while the rest of us stay here and work. It isn't fair."

This is a highly emotional issue. Parents argue that juggling work and family is tough. They face child-care crises, doctors' appointments and family situations that require them to take time off. They say that their co-workers don't see the time they work at home after the kids are in bed. Besides, they argue, someone has to raise the next generation.

Fair enough, say those without children, but we're sick of feeling that our personal lives don't matter. "I get asked all the time to help out so someone can go to his kid's soccer game, or whatever," John says, "and I do it. But when I ask them to return the favor so I can do something that's important to me, they're always too busy." John also complains that his manager never interferes when employees need to do something for their kids, but subjects everyone else to the third degree when they want to take time off or alter their schedule. He adds that parents are asked to travel less often, forgiven for missed deadlines and earn the same money for working fewer hours.

As with most divisive issues, there's truth on both sides, which is a manager's nightmare. Ignoring the issue won't make it go away. (You might as well write job requisitions to fill the empty jobs you're about to have and start packing rations so you'll be ready for the open warfare.) You can make the whole problem go away by putting the focus back on job performance.

Take Action

- **Flexibility is flexibility is flexibility.** Let's assume you're managing exempt employees. If you're a cool boss who allows employees to slip out early or come in late occasionally, give everyone the same flexibility. Resist the temptation to ask what they'll be doing. If you give people time to deal with their personal lives, it doesn't matter whether they spend that time taking their kids to a soccer game, volunteering in a homeless shelter or going to an

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antique show; it's their business, not yours. Measure whether work is completed on time and done well; don't log every time Jane comes in late or leaves early.

- **Give people maneuvering room.** Even if you're a cool boss, it's tougher to give people in nonexempt jobs the flexibility to just cut out early. Often the work they do can be performed only on site (and not at home, for example), and you also must contend with overtime law. Still, we're talking about a job, not a prison camp. If your company policies allow it, let people use vacation or personal leave time in small increments (such as a half-day at a time) provided they request the time in advance so you can plan. Track the hours used.
- **Accept that there will be emergencies.** Crises happen in everyone's life; treat them all equally. Don't reassure parents that "everything will be fine here, just go" and then make it tough for others to get away.
- **Don't make assumptions.** Don't assume that employees without children are more willing to travel, or that parents can't stay late. Make decisions based on who's best suited to the job.
- **Monitor work hours.** No one's asking you to track every hour exempt employees are at work, but watch general trends. Employees might leave at different times for many reasons. But if those leaving on time or early are always the same people, it's time to step in and coach them about sharing the burden.
- **Hold employees equally accountable.** Once deadlines are determined, decide the consequences for not meeting them and hold everyone to the same standard. Don't cut parents extra slack.

Stay Out of Jail

- **Don't make hiring, promotion or work-assignment decisions based on whether an employee is a parent.**
- **Remember the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA).** If your company is covered and the employee is eligible, the law protects the employee's right to miss work to care for an ill child, parent or spouse under many circumstances. Furthermore, if employees are eligible for family leave, you'll want to notify them of that fact so the company can deduct the time taken from their annual allotments.

Do at Least the Minimum

Don't routinely select employees without children to work late or take out-of-town trips.

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