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The Big Idea Series / Work, Parenting, and the Pandemic

What Working Parents Need from Their Managers

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November 11, 2020

Summary. Even during a pandemic, managers are expected to lead their teams and drive business results. But there's a dilemma: They must acknowledge that Covid-19 is putting an enormous strain on people, especially working parents, while also holding them... [more](#)

Even during a pandemic, managers are under pressure to deliver results. They need to effectively lead their teams and drive performance while also supporting the work-life needs of employees, whether they have been called into in-person service or are now completely remote. Working parents, in particular, are struggling to balance their jobs with homeschooling and childcare.

Our research suggests that relearning how to manage people — especially those with kids at home — in this crisis is one of the most significant challenges bosses face today. It's also an enormous opportunity: If addressed wisely, it can boost a team's well-being, culture, and performance now and into the future. To achieve those positive outcomes, it helps to first understand the dilemma you're facing. You should also employ the right strategies — namely those that balance predictability and flexibility — for helping you and your employees succeed.

Managers of hourly, frontline employees in particular should pay especially close attention, since these workers are often the most in need of predictability and flexibility, but are the least likely to get it, as they juggle childcare and leaving their home for work during the pandemic. Yet regardless of who you're managing, there is plenty of evidence-based advice on how you can apply a strategy of predictability and flexibility for your team.

The Manager's Dilemma

Consider what's currently being asked of managers. First, you can't ignore Covid-19 and the effect it's had on employees' lives. If you attempt to enforce rigid deadlines and frequent meetings, you're failing to acknowledge the additional anxieties and demands that people — and, again, especially working parents — face. Research shows that managers who are overly strict on face-to-face time and create arbitrary deadlines without employees' inputs — particularly in teleworking situations — increase employee stress. They also alienate moms and dads, who may

quit if forced to choose between work and family. Similarly, for hourly workers, there may be times when they need to step away from the work floor to take an unexpected call from a child, teacher, or sitter, even if it isn't formal break time. You can establish a norm of flexibility by offering to step in to cover for them, or make it acceptable for peers to do so. An environment in which people feel like they have little control over personal and professional boundaries rarely leads to successful performance.

At the same time, you can't be too lenient. You can't act as if predictable routines and targets don't matter at all. Nor can you give carte blanche, super-lax "idiosyncratic deals" (such as personally negotiated work arrangements and hours) only to working parents. If you do so in ways that are perceived as ignoring other employees or forcing them to pick up the slack, it could create team rancor.

Managers must therefore embrace two strategies that on the surface might seem to conflict: predictability (that is, the structure of set schedules, deadlines, routines, and backups) and "flexible flexibility" (that is, a willingness to shift working parents' tasks and processes, reduce lower-priority work, and incorporate planned slack time to buffer deadlines).

Add Elements of Predictability into the Workday

First, consider how to make work as predictable as possible without unduly burdening parents. Research shows that employees, especially those with family demands, prefer set or

preplanned schedules because they can then better manage their nonwork lives. With Covid-19, schedules are often in flux, but managers can still try to block times for interaction and focused communication and, when those don't work, employ backup systems. Some suggestions are below.

Outline “core hours.” Managers can help create order by organizing core hours or “windows of availability.” This involves gathering scheduling input from all team members, including asking how to best accommodate family needs. Depending on the group's structure and individuals' respective tasks, you might set the same core hours (for example, 10 AM to 2 PM) when everyone is available for collaboration. Teamwork conducted during this “collective time” should be focused with clear goals. For example, Microsoft has encouraged managers to shorten meetings to 30 minutes to ensure that people stay engaged. Another option is to have each team member cover a different set of core hours (for example, 8–11, 11–2, 2–5) so someone is always available for clients or customers. Virtual tools such as instant messaging can help people communicate with colleagues on different schedules and during noncore hours. While it might not be possible to honor all scheduling requests, it is important to consult employees, explain how and why any decisions are made, and also give people the liberty to do any solo projects when it is convenient for them.

Create a buddy system. Studies show that formalizing backup coverage is an effective way to support employees who are dealing with shifting family needs. You can assign each team member a

“Covid buddy,” who will communicate key information when meetings are missed due to last-minute family conflicts. Managers should initiate and oversee the pairing process but solicit employee input whenever possible. If two parents are put together, an added benefit is the potential for informal peer support, as they’re likely to talk not only about work but also about family. In essential-work organizations that typically require employees to be on-site, you might proactively train or hire floater workers to rotate for people who unexpectedly need time off.

Schedule regular one-on-ones. During this continuing crisis, it is even more essential for managers to regularly connect with each employee, especially working parents. Unfortunately, too few bosses do this in a structured way. To start, set up recurring, consistent, and personal one-on-one meetings (by videoconference or phone if you’re not doing essential work on-site) with all your team members both to discuss their work priorities and to ask open-ended questions about how well they’re balancing job and family demands.



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The latter is crucial: Research shows that it is not enough to support employees professionally. To reduce work-family conflict, you must specifically address those issues and figure out the resources people need to perform well both on and off the job. You'll want to build family-supportive supervisor behaviors into these conversations. Four key ones studied in companies around the world are emotional support (asking employees about these issues and showing empathy); instrumental support (such as soliciting input from employees about their preferences for adjusting schedules); role-modeling (demonstrating personal strategies you've used when having to manage competing demands); and creative work-family management (discussing solutions that help the parent but still ensure that the work gets done effectively). Our research shows that, while nearly 100% of managers rate themselves as supportive of employees with families, only half of their subordinates agree with this assessment. An easy way to improve this disconnect is to set aside time for personal discussions and ensure that you always ask

everyone on your team — both parents and nonparents — how everything is going with work and life and whether there is anything you or the company can do to help.

Learn to Be Flexible on Flexibility

Predictability works only up to a point. Inevitably, something unexpected will come up. An employee will need to skip his core hours to deal with a child who is sick or suddenly has too much energy to sit for Zoom classes. A project will be pulled forward, a client will call with an emergency request, or you discover a snag in your supply chain. Managers must therefore be “flexible on flexibility.” This might seem challenging in some settings, particularly retail and food service, where just-in-time scheduling is often the norm. Here are some strategies to consider.

Ensure sustainable workloads and hours. The concept of “flexible flexibility” started with a study of high-talent, overworked professionals (mostly women with families) who negotiated reduced hours (with a temporary commensurate pay cut) to enable more time for everything from family to other life interests. Managers partnered with these employees to create more sustainable workloads and frequently checked in to make sure no one was logging more hours than was healthy. We suggest that you consider this approach for all employees right now.

This can involve eliminating low-value work — for example, jettisoning a report no one reads anymore or allowing a frontline worker to request reduced hours at the beginning or end of the

day, when customer demand tends to be lighter anyway. Other possibilities include allowing two valuable working parents to do a temporary job share. Time-based flexibility can also help; consider split shifts, where parents work in the morning, help their children with school in the afternoon and early evening, and then go back to their jobs at night or on the weekend. Some people may want to work six days a week at fewer hours or four days at longer ones. You might also shift performance goals to be weekly or monthly, rather than daily or weekly, which gives people the discretion to accomplish those tasks during the hours that suit them best. Encourage employees to speak up if they need accommodations.

Be a good role model. You can take the lead in your team to remove social barriers to using work-life flexibility. The idea that “Misery loves company” is confirmed in studies showing that it’s important to communicate to employees that work-life struggles are common and that everyone, including yourself, needs a reshuffle at times. Sharing your own concerns — particularly if you’re working while managing childcare or homeschooling yourself — makes that strain visible. Making changes to your own schedule, and talking about them openly, also showcases flexibility as a solution.

This approach pays off: Research on the power of peers shows that the more managers use flexibility, the more likely their employees will feel they can use work-life flexibility without fear as well.

Experiment with policy rules. In pre-pandemic times, managers often stuck to their organizations' flexible and remote work policies. There were clear rules about who could do it, and where and when. But now is the time to experiment. For example, if your company used to have a mandate that employees had to live within 75 miles of the office, but now no one will be coming in for at least a year, you could certainly allow a young parent to work at their own parents' home in another state to take advantage of free and safe babysitting. If staff were once required on-site every day, perhaps people can now take care of in-person work Monday to Wednesday, while administrative duties are performed remotely on Thursdays and Fridays. Consider developing a team flexibility charter, which includes a list of new mutually agreed-upon rules for working during the pandemic. And some employers — including those with hourly workers — are piloting compressed three- or four-day workweeks of longer but fewer work days, making it easier to juggle childcare with a relative and reduce cost and burnout.

Increase the usability of leave policies. Only 17% of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave, and 24% percent of workers — including many hourly and essential workers — still lack paid sick leave. But even people who have these benefits rarely use them to the full extent because of understaffing, the inability to get time off approved, the stigma of not always putting work first, or fear of job loss. Especially now, managers must ensure that employees feel safe taking paid leave (followed by unpaid leave when needed), not least because it could help prevent the spread of

Covid-19 if an employee or family member is infected.

Managers also need to be straightforward about what happens during time off. They should make it clear that if employees aren't expected to work, their team should not expect responses to email. Further, no one should call or text an employee while they're not supposed to be working; these types of communication tend to be much more invasive because they're harder to ignore. Emergencies happen, but you should define in advance what constitutes one to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

Preempt penalties. It is also important to ensure that there are no repercussions for employees who request flexibility during the pandemic. No one should be held back from raises, promotions, or new opportunities because they needed to modify their schedule or use all their vacation days and sick leave. One solution is to adjust performance standards — for example, by giving parents extra time to meet certain criteria. Some universities are extending tenure clocks for assistant professors; consulting or law firms could do the same. Another solution, particularly for sales employees, is to set up a compensation relief committee to adjust sales quotas or temporarily change compensation structures (for instance, from solely offering commission-based pay to having a combination of base pay and commission bonuses). And in hard-hit service industries such as hospitality, which are facing steep drops in customer demand, some employers are committing to six-month job security recall rights that give laid-off workers assurance of the first rights to

rehiring. Others are offering unlimited sick leave for hourly workers. This may keep employees motivated and loyal, and offset feelings of defeat during these economically challenging times.

These are just a few examples of how important it is to be flexible not only in scheduling but also in adapting relevant human resource policies and practices during the pandemic.

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Changing how you lead your team — on top of trying to hit performance targets in an economic crisis — can seem daunting. But you can't manage the same way you did a year ago. These strategies can help you manage predictably *and* flexibly, and will help you and your employees, especially those with kids, overcome today's pressures. They should also help you build a stronger team that is able to perform well both during the pandemic and beyond.

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