

How Your Family Life Might Make You a Better Manager

By Brian O'Connell

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There may be a strong link between running a household and running a department within a company.

A new study from the University of Georgia concludes that quality time with family has some "unforeseen benefits" on the job for managers. (<https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037/apl0000827>)

Study researchers analyzed leadership practices, asking participants how often they engaged in behaviors such as making sure employees know expectations and helping subordinates strengthen their skills. "The results showed links between positive family interactions after hours and more effective leadership during the workday," the summary stated.

What Managers Think

The "family" impact on management goes beyond traditional assumptions about how home life affects work, said Szu Jan Joanna Lin, the study's lead author and an assistant professor in the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia.

"I think we focus so much on the negative things about work/family balance or the demands of a family—people need to meet these family demands, so that's why sometimes they couldn't perform well at work," Lin said. "Yet we're finding that leaders could be more effective at work because of their family life."

Lin pointed out that a manager's positive interactions with family at home might influence how he or she interacts with employees at work, such as "providing assistance and showing concern for employees, and ... helping employees develop their strengths and showing enthusiasm about what needs to be accomplished on a specific workday." Bringing those interactive lessons from home into the workplace is a good lesson for all managers, Lin said.

Managers tend to agree with Lin, adding that the impact of family on a manager's life goes deeper than even the study suggests.

"I definitely think I'm a better manager now that I'm a parent," said Bret Bonnet, president of Quality Logo Products, a promotional products distributor in Chicago. "There is actually a ton of commonality between raising a child and managing a team of adults. In fact, raising a child is often easier than managing an adult."

Empathy Rising

Talk to a business leader about managing family and managing a workplace in 2021, and you'll hear a great deal about compassion, empathy and teamwork.

"In business and in a family, work gets accomplished through relationships," said Makenzie M. Rath, president at Talent Plus, Inc., a Lincoln, Neb.-based human resource management firm. "It's the cornerstone of how we onboard colleagues and the culture that evolves. When you have a family, whether it's carpools, shared tasks, meal cooperatives in neighborhoods, overnights to give another family a break, clearing

a neighbor's driveway of snow, it's not a cliché that it takes a village to raise a child."

According to Rath, employees want a manager who cares about them and watches over them, just like in their core family.

"We have colleagues who come to work with troubles every day, whether it's a spouse who's lost a job, a family member who is ill or who has passed away," Rath said. "We've seen some heartbreaking things during the pandemic."

With so much employee angst bubbling to the surface, Rath believes she's become more empathetic. "I'm committed to addressing ... immediate concerns with compassion, gratitude and confidence—in both my family life and as a manager," she said.

"For my family, as well as our colleagues, the pandemic has allowed [us] to slow down a bit to eat dinner together, to spend weekends without running to as many activities," she added. "These are patterns that I plan to take into the 'next normal' in the workplace and will encourage those around me to do the same."

A Need to Establish Boundaries

While the managers interviewed for this story tend to agree that strong connections at home lead to strong connections on the job, each workplace, just like a home, has a hierarchy that must be respected.

That said, don't take the parent/child relationship too far in the workplace.

"For parents working in the business world, it's important not to equate business leadership with being a spouse or a parent," said Peter Jackson, CEO of Bluescape Software, a cloud-based technology firm in San Francisco. "I've been told, 'Don't play the CEO dad/husband with me, please' by my team members. Engagements like that serve to ground me and allow me to see the perspective of everyone in my organization, no matter their position or level."

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