



Disclosure and Reciprocity: ON THE JOB STRATEGIES FOR TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS. . .AND FAMILY

The concept of *family friendly companies* emerged in response to the unprecedented number of mothers entering the workforce in the 1980s. Organizations have continued to develop initiatives in response to the needs of employees, particularly employed parents, for less rigid boundaries between work and home. Employers recognize that their ability to accommodate employees' lives beyond the workplace affects recruitment, retention, and productivity. Work/life programs are specifically designed to identify benefit packages, work arrangements, and community resources that support the personal lives of employees. Onsite child care, elder care resources, and flextime work schedules are examples of support offered by many workplaces. The concept of *work/life integration* describes a further softening of job/home boundaries, implying a more seamless flow across roles and responsibilities in the two spheres.

Workplace support and flexibility to respond to family matters during employment hours is crucial for parents caring for children with mental health disorders. For these parents, uninterrupted focus on job responsi-

bilities is often the exception rather than the rule. A telephone call from the child's school, a caregiver, or even the child herself may disrupt the parent's concentration at any time. The call may be about a minor concern that is handled quickly by the parent, allowing a return to job tasks after only momentary disruption. On the other hand, a crisis with the child could necessitate the parent leaving the workplace immediately without knowing when return to the job will be possible. Without a responsive workplace, parents are often unable to secure paid work, maintain employment, or manage the stress from the overwhelming and competing demands of home and job (Rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie, 2002; Freeman, Litchfield, & Warfield, 1995).

Common Ground? Families and Employers is a research project designed to gather information about how parents' employment is affected when caring for a child with a mental health disorder. Specifically, *Common Ground* seeks to identify 1) the barriers and strategies to finding and sustaining employment, 2) workplace characteristics (from parents' perspectives) that enhance work/family

integration, and 3) workplace policies and practices (from employers' perspectives) that are responsive to needs of families with children who have serious emotional or behavioral disorders. Understanding employment challenges and solutions will empower parents to make informed job choices, position employers to become more family responsive, and encourage communities to provide more family support services.

An on-line survey of parents caring for children with serious mental health disorders was conducted by *Common Ground* staff. The survey, posted on the Research and Training Center website, solicited participation from parents who were currently caring for children with serious emotional or behavioral disorders at home and who were employed, seeking employment, or unemployed by choice to care for the children with emotional or behavioral disorders. Eligible parents answered 30 questions about how they manage both employment and family responsibilities.

Over three hundred parents responded (N=349). The typical respondent was a college-educated Eu-

ropean-American woman in her forties. Sixty percent of the respondents worked full-time and 19 percent were unemployed. Of those employed, most were in professional or technical positions. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were in partnered relationships and most were biological parents of their children. A total of 766 children were represented, 60 percent of whom were identified by the respondents as having serious emotional or behavioral disorders. The majority of the children with disorders (73 percent) were boys. The mean age of all the children was 13 years old.

The effect of caregiving on employment status for the respondents was significant. Nearly half (48 percent) reported that at some time they had to quit work to care for their children with mental health disorders and 27 percent indicated that employment had been terminated because of work interruptions due to care responsibilities. Of those respondents who were unemployed, 11 percent reported that they were currently unable to find a job because of care demands.

The survey asked parents about their perceptions of workplace support that assisted them in meeting caregiving responsibilities. Parents replied to questions about support from individuals—supervisors and coworkers—as well as family friendly policies. Parents also identified actions or strategies they used to sustain employment while responding to family care needs. Two strategies frequently practiced by the parents, *disclosure* and *reciprocity*, are discussed and guidelines for effective utilization are offered.

Disclosure

Employed parents caring for children with serious emotional disorders face a decision about whether or not to disclose their children's mental health status to individuals within the workplace. The decision to disclose at work about a child's mental health is a strategy that may be used to gain

interpersonal and organizational support for meeting family and work responsibilities. Disclosure can provide personal and social benefits including opportunities to receive emotional support, reduce stigma, and educate others (Ellison, Russinova, MacDonald-Wilson, & Lyass, 2003). Employees disclosing may gain greater access to benefits and improve work/family integration. However, disclosure is not a strategy without risks. Revealing personal family information can be misperceived, leaving the parent vulnerable to discrimination in the hiring process, job evaluations, work assignments, or promotions. It can also lead to job insecurity or job loss.

Respondents in our survey were asked if they had told their current supervisor or coworkers about their child's mental health problems. The vast majority of the sample indicated that they had disclosed about their child's emotional disorder to both supervisors (83%) and coworkers (86%). Parents also reported receiving a high level of support from

within the workplace that helped them respond to the needs of their children with emotional or behavioral disorders. Eighty-eight percent of supervisors and 87 percent of coworkers were rated as *very supportive* or *supportive*. Further study is necessary to more fully understand the complexities of workplace disclosure and support. For example, is there a level of support from supervisors or coworkers that precedes parent's disclosure? What workplace characteristics enhance or deter disclosure?

Disclosure within the workplace about a child's mental health status is an individual and personal decision. Only the parent knows the scope of both the family situation and job issues. Disclosure is a process that is multidimensional and requires careful consideration of key variables: 1) the target audience, 2) timing, 3) type of information revealed, and 4) confidentiality.

Issues related to disclosure are highlighted in these comments by parents surveyed:

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISCLOSURE

■ **WHY AND WHEN?** Identify the goals, benefits, and risks of disclosure. List the pros and cons of different timing options: during the interview process, when the job is secured, when a positive performance pattern is established, when a response to a non-crisis family matter is needed, when a crisis with your child occurs, or never.

■ **WHO?** Identify whom you might tell. Think about how you might benefit from a specific person knowing and the possible consequences. Consider your options: no one, your employer, your immediate supervisor, a higher-level manager, one or more coworkers, human resource personnel, or employee assistance program staff.

■ **WHAT?** Think about and rehearse what information you want to share. You can be general or specific about your child's situation. For example you might say that your child has a disability, a chronic illness, or a mental health disorder. Perhaps you prefer to name and explain the specific diagnosis, describe the behaviors involved, or identify treatments and supports required.

■ **CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY.** Don't assume that the information will be held in confidence. Ask if the information will need to be shared or if it will be written down. Request that the information be held in confidence.

Honesty with my employer—that has been the main strategy and working very, very hard when life is going well to make up for the times when I have to be out from work.

I communicate more with my supervisor. I don't feel stigmatized.

I do try to be up front with selective people about this. Some people I tell about my son's emotional disorder; to others I just say that my son has a chronic illness that sometimes requires hospitalization.

Reciprocity

The option to alter the times and physical location of work tasks, referred to as *workplace flexibility* (Lewis, Kagan, & Heaton 2000), is pivotal to a parent's ability to fulfill job duties and respond to the child's changing mental health needs. Parents caring for children with disabilities, however, are often apprehensive about requesting flexibility arrangements, concerned that their commitment to the job will be questioned (Lewis, Kagan, & Heaton, 2000).

Gaining the necessary flexibility is a process that involves personal decisions and workplace dynamics. Par-

ents initiating a request for flexibility will, out of necessity, confront the issues of disclosure. Typically, responsibility for granting flexibility to employees is at the discretion of line managers or supervisors (Yeandle, Wigfield, Crompton, & Dennett, 2002). Supervisors must consider policies and practices, relationships, and the workplace culture before responding to the request for flexibility.

A strategy used by some parents to enhance their access to flexibility is reciprocity. Workplace reciprocity is a relational process of mutual exchange between the parent/employee and the immediate supervisor or co-worker resulting in benefits to both the parent and the workgroup. For example, the parent may agree to accept less prestigious job assignments in exchange for a later start time. The parent gains increased autonomy over the work schedule and the workplace profits from the employee's increased loyalty and work engagement (Sherony & Green, 2002). Reciprocity may be a formal process involving permanent modifications in the work arrangement, or an informal one-time agreement. Formal or informal, reciprocity requires negotiation and subsequent accountability for the commitments made.



Respect and trust between the parent and supervisor or parent and co-worker are essential ingredients of successful reciprocity agreements.

Parents' use of reciprocity is reflected in their comments:

I work for an airline and it provides me with great flexibility. I am able to trade shifts with other people to accommodate my needs.

I have tried to be open and honest with my supervisors to assure them I can handle my job and family responsibilities and will work overtime if I have to. I also offer to help co-workers in [hopes that] they can help when I need it.

I have been employed in small, family owned businesses that understand the need for parents to be accessible to their kids. They have more flexibility to their positions, especially when you prove how valuable you can be to their business and give 150% when you are there.

It is a give and take relationship with flexibility, and understanding during times of crisis and when things even out, I attempt to give back 150%.

Reciprocity arrangements, like disclosure, can have unintended costs for the parent and repercussions in the workgroup. For example, to demon-

GUIDELINES FOR RECIPROCITY

- **BE PROACTIVE.** Find out what options may be available if you need to flex your work schedule or location.
- **OFFER WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS.** Make suggestions about possible arrangements. Identify benefits to the organization. Think about the unique skills you have to offer to the workplace as a direct result of your experiences as a parent of a child with mental health disabilities. Use them as bargaining power.
- **DEMONSTRATE COMMITMENT.** Follow through on your agreement. Communicate your appreciation to your supervisor and coworkers for their support.
- **KNOW YOUR LIMITS.** Be realistic about what you can and can not do. Reciprocity is mutually beneficial and should reflect equity.

strate work commitment and show appreciation for flexibility, the parent may overfunction while at work. Also, coworkers may interpret the supervisor's agreement to reciprocity as favoritism, or a supervisor may risk reprimand by management for not following organizational practices.

Conclusion

Disclosure and reciprocity are two strategies identified by respondents in this study as helping to achieve work/life integration. Each strategy involves bringing personal family issues into the workplace so as to increase options for fulfilling job obligations while maximizing availability for care responsibilities. Some parents may find these strategies useful, while other parents may perceive the risks as outweighing the potential gains. Additional research is needed to fully understand the characteristics of

work settings in which these and other strategies function best.

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Julie M. Rosenzweig and Kitty Huffstutter are staff members of the Common Ground? Families and Employers project at the RTC.