

Work Hard, Live Hard

Six Things Smart Executives do to Promote Work-Life Harmony & Improve their Bottom Line

Kendra Dyanne Rivera, M.A.
Sarah J. Tracy, PhD

2/27/2009
Report# 0901

The Project for Wellness and Work-Life
<http://www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/>
The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
Arizona State University

The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) is a consortium of scholars who examine the intersections of work, domestic life, and wellness. Research foci include workplace bullying, emotion labor, burnout, conflict, gender and work-life negotiation. PWWL holds a use-inspired research approach, developing projects that increase theoretical knowledge while simultaneously impacting policy and improving the everyday lives of women and men. PWWL is a strategic initiative of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit our website: www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/. For correspondence, please contact Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu.

Executive Summary

Smart executives in any industry are concerned with providing an environment for their employees that promotes satisfaction and success. Smart bosses also know that retaining the best employees is key to the stability and profitability of the company.

Recent studies show that women and men alike are drawn to and stay at companies that embrace work-life harmony. Employee satisfaction is tied to the ability to be successful both in work and at home. Although hostile economic climates might cause some organizations to cut back on work-life policies, worker satisfaction and retention remain two integral money-saving components to business. Creating policies and cultures that promote work-life harmony is essential for improving the organization's bottom line.

Work-life policies are not created exclusively for women. However, women have historically been more likely to request and use policies that promote work-life harmony. Women now outnumber men in graduation rates from universities and combined with the retirement of Baby Boomers and recent economic shifts, women make up over half the work force. But research shows that men are also increasingly likely to judge their family as just as important as their job (Kauffman, 2005). With the availability of resources such as "Working Mother's Top 100 Companies for Work-Life Wellness" employees have information about the best companies, and the most competitive and brightest employees have little patience for a working environment that doesn't fit the multiple priorities in their lives. Recent research by the Project for Wellness and Work-Life on male executives and bosses (Tracy & Rivera, In Progress) provides new insight into how smart bosses can promote work-life wellness in their organizations.

Organizational gatekeepers, such as managers, business owners, and executives, are in a position to influence both work-life policies and culture. Because of the competitive economy, every effort to enhance the company's productivity is invaluable.

This white paper presents six practices that executives can use to promote work-life harmony. They include: 1) Making changes at home, 2) Leading by example, 3) Not letting parental leave turn into an off-ramp, 4) Putting policy onto paper, 5) Creating a strong culture of work-life harmony, and 6) Having the courage to embrace new ideas. To measure where you and your organization stand, we also provide a quiz to assess work-life executive practices.

Background

Bosses play a key role in the creation, implementation, and use of work-life policies

Organizational leaders are central to the workplace. They set the example for behavior, they recruit, hire and socialize new personnel, and they establish the tone for the organizational culture. Organizational cultures can range from being competitive and fierce, to supportive and flexible. Some cultures are supportive to a variety of ways of acting and being, while others promote a one-size-fits all dictate, rewarding employees who follow the rules and do not think outside of the box. Organizational leaders' personally held values and behaviors impact a variety of organizational practices and policies. In fact, the way a boss leads has a significant influence on their employees' feelings of work-life harmony.

Most employees live complicated lives consisting of activities that include work, family, community, spirituality, fitness, leisure and more. Like different sides of a crystal, these different facets work together to create the vibrant and colorful identities of employees. When employees are so stressed from work that they are unable to appreciate and indulge the multiple facets of their life, they easily can become disgruntled, one-dimensional and burned out. Such employees, even if they are spending hours and hours at work, are not healthy or productive for themselves or for the organization.

Organizations that are supportive of work-life harmony are more likely to have healthy employees and higher employee productivity

Stress and burnout lead to increased sick time, lowered job productivity or performance, and employee turnover (Dar & Johns, 2008; Tracy, In Press). In contrast, research indicates that organizations that are supportive of work-life harmony are more likely to have more healthy employees, higher organizational productivity, less turnover, less absenteeism and increased organizational commitment (Thompson, et al, 1999). Furthermore, employees who are so overwhelmed with a single aspect of their life, like work, are less likely to seek out complex solutions, see outside of the box, or understand a variety of solutions to a certain problem or issue.

In other words, employees who feel fulfilled at work, at home, and at play are more productive throughout their lives, including their jobs. If they aren't fulfilled, they are

likely to look for another job, taking with them the time, energy, and resources that the organization has invested in them.

So, what should smart bosses do? First it's important to realize that work-life harmony is not a women's problem—it's a goal that both men and women strive for. Today's fathers are spending increasing time and energy on housework and childcare and college graduates want to have both vibrant careers and fulfilling family lives. Second, just endorsing gender equality is not enough. More and more organizational leaders say

Executives that assist employees in harmonizing their work and life are having an important impact on their organization's bottom line.

that they view men and women on an equal basis (Tracy & Rivera, In Progress). However, many organizations still use practices that systematically erode work-life harmony and make it difficult for employees—women in particular—to succeed.

This paper details several specific practices that set smart executives apart in terms of promoting work-life harmony and improving the bottom line. By adopting these practices, bosses can enhance their work-life policies and culture, and in doing so, attract the best employees while retaining the ones they have. Being a smart work-life harmony boss, in short, is good for the bottom line.

Six Things Executives Can Do To Promote Work-Life Harmony

Past examinations of work-life research coupled with The Project for Wellness and Work-Life's research suggests that bosses and organizational gatekeepers should not only implement work-life policies, but also adjust their lives. Executives should therefore *work hard and live hard*. Here are six tactics designed to help bosses implement these changes in their lives, and tips to assist in implementing these tactics.

1) START AT HOME

Perhaps one of the most subtle and surprising spaces for bosses to create work-life harmony is to reflect upon their own practices at home. Indeed, much of an employee's organizational success is not only because of to their activities at work, but are also due to who is doing the child and domestic care at home. Who does the chores—such as cleaning, preparing meals, caring for children—has consequential, but rarely thought about ramifications for organizational success. Over the past two and a half decades,

women have made significant shifts into the public sphere of work. Men, meanwhile, still are transitioning into doing their fair share around the house.

Tips

- ❖ With your family, make a list of all the chores that keep your house running smoothly
- ❖ Assign each of the chores on the list equally between partners, explicitly communicating who does what and when
- ❖ Don't be afraid to talk to your employees about the ways that you prioritize your own home

Bosses can do a lot toward promoting work-life harmony by practicing it themselves. To do so, they should consider engaging in a fair share of domestic and child care work. Although research indicates that men are spending more time caring for their children than past generations (Chethik, 2006), women still complete more domestic work (Alberts & Trethewey, 2007; Bond, et al., 2002) regardless of their employment status, income, or hours worked (Coltrane, 2004; Sullivan, 2000).

So while the majority of male executives rely on a partner for at-home child care and cleaning (Drew & Murtagh, 2005), female managers and employees cannot say the same. Women typically work a full-time job of paid employment and then return home to a “second shift” of domestic and care work (Hochschild, 1997). When more men, including male executives, do work at home, this makes it fairer for everyone. And since employees are looking to their bosses as an example, bosses who prioritize home and do their fair share of the duties at home model for their workers the values that will also help them to be more healthy and productive.

2) PUT IT ON PAPER

Another step bosses can take toward promoting work-life harmony is by making work-life policies permanent and accessible. This can be done through formal policies and training manuals that specifically outline your work-life policies. Employees should have clear information about parental leave, flex-time, and alternative work roles that allow them to engage multiple facets of their lives.

Too many bosses rely on an informal culture of flexibility rather than designing and publicizing formal policies for work-life flexibility. Although it is important to create a culture that embraces work-life, it is equally important to set up standardized, structured (and regulated) policies that are on paper.

Tips

- ❖ Start by reviewing all current official policies at your workplace.
- ❖ Call a meeting with employees and find out what sorts of policies are important to them.
- ❖ Type up a set of formal guidelines and policies addressing work-life issues, and place it in a public and accessible part of your employees' environment.

Setting up formalized work-life policies is important for several reasons. First, many employees are shy about asking about flex-time, daycare, or leave time to pursue more education or to help care for a family member. They may feel that they will be looked down on or seen as less committed to their jobs if they ask about or use work-life policies. Putting the policies on paper serves, if nothing else, as a method for educating employees about the policies and options available. Formalizing the options also levels the playing field in your workplace, clearly showing all employees that policies are available to everyone and are not a result of specialized treatment. Plus, putting your policies on paper

and having them accessible to your workers shows employees that you are committed to helping them achieve work-life harmony.

3) **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Many executives fail to actually *use* the work-life options that are available through their organization. For some employees, it may seem like there's a disconnect between

what the boss *says* and what the boss actually *does*. Although executives don't necessarily *have* to be role models of balance in order to promote work-life harmony, the bottom line is that the boss's values and actions have a deep influence on others. Female employees, in particular, believe that bosses must first embody and practice work-life harmony before other employees will feel comfortable doing so (Drew & Murtagh, 2005).

Tips

- ❖ Do an experiment! Track all your work-related communication for two days. When are you sending emails and making phone calls?
- ❖ Before you send that email from your Blackberry at 10:30p.m. ask yourself~ Could I send this in the morning?
- ❖ Talk to your co-workers and employees to see if it's reasonable to try a "curfew" on work-related communication

The use of work-life policies is largely dependent on the endorsement of senior management. Employees crave to see their bosses actually use things like flex-time or leave-time so that they understand that they will not be punished or seen as uncommitted workers if they use them as well.

What does this look like in practice? Bosses should be aware of their work hours and times. Regularly staying late, coming in early, avoiding vacation,

sending email at 12 midnight and responding to email on holidays sends very specific messages about the primacy of work in relation to other facets of life. Several innovative organizations have gone so far as to implement a “cap” on email or have strict rules about the hours during which email can be sent. While these measures may not seem necessary or feasible for every workplace, bosses should keep in mind that their behaviors communicate their values to employees. Changing work habits to reflect the ways in which life outside of work is also a priority will not only assist bosses in their own mental health and well-being, but trickles down to their employees as well.

4) DON'T LET PARENTAL LEAVE BECOME AN OFF-RAMP

Companies are increasingly offering the opportunity for employees to take time off work when they have or adopt a child. In many cases, though, when the leave-time evaporates, the parent is faced with a difficult decision about whether to quit or come

back full-time to work. When faced with this “all or nothing” decision, some of the brightest, most educated and talented employees decide to completely quit work. This causes a “brain drain” for organizations. A “brain drain” is when valuable employees who may have been groomed, trained and educated for years in a certain organization, disappear forever, causing lost productivity and morale (Hewlett, 2007).

There is another and better way. Rather than letting parental leave become a complete off-ramp, some of the most creative organizations devise alternative work opportunities. For example, after recognizing its dismal retention of women, Deloitte &

Touche, a top American accounting firm, instituted a pioneering program called Personal Pursuits. This program allows employees who take extended parental leave to keep their professional certifications up to date, have mentors and coaches, keep their email address, come to company holiday parties, and even work one day a month. Engaging these creative options allows employees to stay connected, and allows companies to retain key talent.

Tips

- ❖ Ask employees about what they plan to do after paid parental leave runs out
- ❖ Have a plan in place (and on the calendar) for keeping in contact with parents who take even a short leave
- ❖ For employees who choose extended leave, offer creative options for them to stay in touch.

In other words, keeping your employees connected will not only allow them more options for work-life harmony, but it will also help your organization to retain its valuable employees.

5) *PUT IT INTO PRACTICE*

As we mentioned earlier, it is important for work-life policies to be formalized through policy and training. It is just as essential for leaders to encourage workplace relationships and cultures that are supportive and respectful of employees as whole people. That means employees should feel comfortable using work-life policies, and that the organization provides the necessary “back up” so that the employees who are still at

work don’t get over-burdened and resent their co-workers. For example, when one employee takes a leave, organizations need to reallocate the workload carefully and take into account both the employee on leave and the employees in the organization who often make up the missed work.

Tips

- ❖ Make formal plans for “back-up” if someone utilizes a work-life policy, so that other employees are not over-burdened
- ❖ Provide adequate notice to employees when they need to clear their schedules for meetings or travel
- ❖ Avoid calling “last minute” mandatory meetings

What does a supportive work-life culture like this look like? Good executives create corporate cultures that are sensitive to the variety of facets that make up employee identity. This means being sensitive of workplace time demands and employees’ feelings of control over their own time. Working overtime is not always problematic, but it *can* be when it is mandatory, and is a surprise

for employees. The same is true with unexpected meetings late on a Friday afternoon, work travel over weekends and holidays, or requiring employees to attend a company holiday party on a night in which it is common for employees to have conflicting events with their family, friends, church, or in their community.

As it stands, many organizations suffer significant conflicts between formal organizational policies that claim to support work-life balance, and informal workplace cultures that discourage the use of such benefits and instead reward long hours, no leave, and face-time (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Smart bosses realize that policies only go so far. To make a more productive working environment, bosses live out their work-life values by incorporating it into the workplace culture.

6) HAVE THE COURAGE TO EMBRACE NEW IDEAS

How *smart* are you? Test your work-life savvy~

This quiz will help you learn whether you engage in activities that can help promote work-life balance in both the short and long term for male and female employees. Circle each of the following statements that describe you.

Starting at Home

1. I could be married to someone who works as much as I currently do, and still be successful in the workplace.
2. I have or would leave my job to follow my spouse's career.
3. I participate in community activities and contribute to at least half of the household tasks needed to maintain my home.

Leading by Example

1. I work reasonable hours that allow a variety of outside activities and allow me to support my family.
2. I regularly take vacations.
3. I regularly use the work-life policies offered in my organization (e.g., parental leave, teleworking, flextime, flexspace).

Employee Reintroduction

1. When my employees take leave, I keep in touch with them actively encourage them to return to work.
2. I promote the availability of a variety of work roles, including job sharing, flex-time, part-time, or consulting both in policies and in your organizational culture.

Policy and Practice

1. Policies and activities that promote work-life balance are included in formal documentation.
2. I make sure my employees are aware of work-life policies, making sure policies are easy to understand and accessible. Employees don't need to ask about policies.
3. When an employee makes use of a work-life policy, I take actions to ensure that other employees are not left picking up the slack.

Other

1. I talk about work-life policies as good for all employees as well as good for the organization.
2. I embrace change and put into practice the research that backs the importance and success of work-life friendly organizations.

Being an effective executive means being flexible and embracing change. Bosses face a constant barrage of tasks and people that they must juggle skillfully in order to succeed. The ability to embrace new ideas is one of the characteristics that sets leaders apart. When it comes to work-life harmony and making the office a more healthy and productive space, embracing new ideas is crucial in the face of a changing economy and shifting workforce. Embracing the tips in this paper will likely require the courage to change and be a work-life leader.

This change goes beyond implementing formal policies. Work-life harmony is also about

creating healthy organizational cultures and reclaiming the value of work done at home.

It requires learning to think about work-life issues in a new way.

How did you score?

Add up the numbers of statements that describe you.

10-13 – You are a work-life champion. You understand the complexity of work-life, are a good example, and realize that work-life spans practices both at home and at work.

5-9 – You are a work-life leader. You understand many of the issues that relate to successful work-life balance, and still have space to learn and incorporate more.

1-4 – You're a workaholic. You are likely a very hard worker yourself. By changing some of your work-life practices and policies, you will have better results from employees as well as provide successful opportunities for your partner and children.

When executives acknowledge that both men and women are impacted by work-life, they are taking one step toward learning to re-think work-life for their employees. Most bosses have probably felt the strains of feeling pulled between the demands of their job and the challenges of maintaining home and relationships. So it is no

surprise that all employees need to embrace the many facets of their identities, both at work and outside of work.

Summary and Conclusion

*Smart bosses know that for employees to be successful, productive, and fulfilled, they need to both **WORK HARD** and **LIVE HARD***

Women and men alike are increasingly attracted to and stay at companies that embrace work-life harmony. Although bosses tend to say that they encourage gender equality in their workplace, formalizing work-life policies, creating work-life friendly organizational cultures, and providing an example for employees are practices that will further establish successful organizations.

The research is clear: workplaces that provide a variety of work-life policies and encourage a work-life friendly culture have employees who are more productive and loyal to the organization (Lambert, 2000; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). We also know that workers are more likely to utilize the policies if their boss demonstrates work-life harmony in their own lives.

By promoting formal work-life policies, encouraging work-life friendly cultures, and enacting values of both work and home, smart bosses can sustain a productive work-life environment. In doing so, both the boss and their employees can work hard *and* live hard.

References

- Alberts, J., & Trethewey, A. (2007). Love, honor and thank. *Greater Good*, 4, 20-22.
- Andreassi, J., & Thompson, C. (2004). Work-family culture. *Sloan Work and Family Research Network*. Retrieved May 13, 2008 from http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=262.
- Ashcraft, K. L. (1999). Managing maternity leave: A qualitative analysis of temporary executive succession. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 240-280.
- Bond, J. T., Thompson, C., Galinsky, E., & Protts, D. (2002). Highlights of the national study of the changing workforce executive summary. New York, NY: Families and Work Institute. Available at www.familiesandwork.org.
- Buzzanell, P. M. & Lui, M. (2005). Struggling with maternity leave policies and practices: A poststructuralist feminist analysis of gendered organizing. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 33, 1-25.
- Chethik, N. (2006). *VoiceMale: What husbands really think about their marriages, their wives, sex, housework and commitment*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Coltrane, S. (2004). Elite careers and family commitment: It's (still) about gender. *Annals AAPSS*, 596, 214-220.
- Darr, W., & Johns, G. (2008). Work strain, health, and absenteeism: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13, 293-318.
- Deetz, S., Tracy, S. J., & Simpson, J. L. (2000). *Leading organizations through transition: Communication and cultural change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Vente, W., Kamphuis, J. H., Emmelkamp, P. M. G., & Blonk, R. W. B. (2008). Individual and group cognitive-behavioral treatment for work-related stress complaints and sickness absence: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13, 214-231.
- Drew, E., & Murtagh, E. M. (2005). Work/life balance: Senior management champions or laggards? *Women in Management Review*, 20, 262-278.
- Hattery, A. (2001). *Women, work, and family: Balancing and weaving*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hewlett, S. A. (2007). *Off-ramps and on-ramps: Keeping talented women on the road to success*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Hochschild, A. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Kaufman, G. (2005). Gender role attitudes and college students' work and family expectations. *Gender Issues*, 22, 58-71.

- Kirby, E. L., & Krone, K. J. (2002). "The policy exists but you can't really use it": Communication and the structuration of work-family policies. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 20, 50-77.
- Lambert, S. J. (2000). Added benefits: The link between work-life benefits and organizational citizenship behavior. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, 801-815.
- Lewis, S. (1997). "Family friendly" employment policies: A route to changing organizational culture or playing about at the margins. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 4, 13-23.
- Machung, A. (1989). Talking career, thinking job: Gender differences in career and family expectations of Berkeley seniors. *Feminist Studies*, 15, 35-58.
- Oliver, M. L., & Shapiro, T. M. (2006). *Black wealth/white wealth: A new perspective on racial inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Perry-Smith, J. E., & Blum, T. C. (2000). Work-Family human resources bundles and perceived organizational performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, 1107-1117.
- Peterson, L. W., & Albrecht, T. L. (1999). Where gender/power/politics collide: Deconstructing maternity leave policy. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 8, 168-181.
- Schor, J. B. (1998). *The overspent American: Upscaling, downshifting, and the new consumer*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sullivan, O. (2000). The division of domestic labor: Twenty years of change? *Sociology*, 34(3), 437-456.
- Thompson, C., Beauvais, L., & Lyness, K. (1999). When work-family benefits are not enough: The influence of work-family culture on benefit utilization, organizational attachment, and work-family conflict. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 54, 392-415.
- Tracy, S. J., & Rivera K. D. (In Progress). Endorsing equity and applauding stay-at-home moms: Examining the viewpoints of male executives about gender roles, home and work-life. *Management Communication Quarterly*.
- Tracy, S. (Accepted 2009; In Press). Managing burnout and moving toward employee engagement: A critical literature review and communicative approach toward reinvigorating the study of stress at work. In P. Lutgen-Sandvik & B. Davenport Sypher (Eds.), *The Destructive Side of Organizational Communication: Processes, Consequences and Constructive Ways of Organizing*, Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.
- Tracy, S. J. (Accepted 2009; In Press). Care as a Common Good. For inclusion in the special issue: Redefining the Professor(iate): Valuing Commitments to Care and Career in Academe for Women's Studies in Communication. *Women and Language*.

Tracy, S. J., & Trethewey, A. (2005). Fracturing the real-self↔fake-self dichotomy: Moving toward crystallized organizational identities. *Communication Theory*, 15, 168-195.