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What's Broken? Not the Mold

Abstract

Changing workforce demographics in the American workforce indicate that flexible work arrangements (FWA) are appreciated and valued by employees, yet employers still resist their support. While not explicit in their rationale, managerial mindsets may hold that deviations from historical ideal worker frameworks detract from performance potential. As this continues, mothers are especially stigmatized for using FWA as it differs from traditional, male hegemonic behaviors. Overlaying the case of a rising executive with a study of historical management theory, it may take until Generation Y¹ (the generation primarily born in the 1980s and 1990s who are typically perceived as increasingly familiar with digital and electronic technology) is fully entrenched in leadership for a *différance* to break the mold in FWA acceptance.

What's Broken

As a consultant, I often advise C-level executives on strategic talent management maneuvers such as identifying and developing emerging leaders for succession plans. In many cases, this advising has confronted the difficulties women in the workforce encounter when seeking out leadership responsibilities. In one example, the CEO of an established e-tail¹ company was perplexed when the Vice President of Merchandising announced she was leaving. He had been proud of his record of taking risks to promote from within and, while there was no one immediately ready to replace the VP, a new Director had good potential. However, sales were off, margins were tight, and the organization was undergoing an acquisition which underscored the importance of making the right move.

As a graduate of a top tier business school with Big-Five² experience in the 1990s, the managerialism models the CEO had learned took hold. Despite being proud of his “kick-ass company” that “broke the mold” in its innovations, he knew the other vice presidents were working long hours seven days a week, and left child care to their stay-at-home wives. Because she had been leaving work early one or two days a week, in sharing the opportunity with the Director, the CEO stated that before he could formally offer her the new role, she would have to agree to stop working the “mom hours.” Despite his want to be cutting edge, he managed the situation no differently than one would have twenty years ago.

¹ Electronic-retail, a subset of ecommerce.

² The 1990s Big Five: *Ernst & Young, Deloitte & Touche, Arthur Andersen/Andersen Consulting, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers.*

Despite the progressive direction post-modernism has taken management since the 1990s, there is still a strong hegemony which holds the traditional “ideal worker” model (Williams, 2000, p. 2) in high esteem. As these workers are dedicated to their work around the clock, this model thereby seemingly excludes mothers of childbearing age. Although pioneering efforts and successful case studies have demonstrated its potential, leaders still seem reticent to completely embrace the notion of flexible work arrangements (FWA). Examining the evolution of management in tandem with Karl Weick’s theory of enactment helps make some sense of this phenomena, enlightening us as to why the CEO thoughts that “mom hours” were an issue to be confronted, and further perpetuating the sexist stigmatization of those who use FWA.

The Evolution of the Ideal

Today’s workforce is comprised of as many as five generations of employees, with three comprising the majority of workers: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y³ (Helyer & Lee, 2012). When the Baby Boomers entered the workforce, they learned exacting standards for excellence. Taylor’s scientific methodology (1911) suggested there was one best way to perform work, which adhered to templates, models, and job-specific criteria. Compounded by Weber’s bureaucratic (1947) rules, leaders had their place and their space to do their jobs. For this generation, work activities were bound to tradition and committed to established and proven modes and models. Workers who were dedicated to their jobs, available at all times, and loyal to their companies were labeled as *ideal*.

Generation X workers came into the workforce in the 1980s and began assuming leadership roles in the 1990s. By then, management began to look at the workplace through a social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966) lens, imparting adapted meaning to aspects of the environment that were deemed significant. These definitions became unquestionably accepted and, over time, were sustained as real and true. While concepts such as “emotional intelligence” began to gain momentum with Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), organizations continued to respect and reward ideological performance. The 1990s also marked the heyday of operational business programs such as Taguchi and Deming’s Total Quality Management (TQM), Motorola’s Six Sigma Practices, and business process re-engineering (BPR). Highly controlled methods such as these had clear benchmarks of success and rote standards for performance. Thus, although management was evolving toward a more humanistic understanding and transformative approach, leaders perpetuated the ideal worker model as one who could achieve the desired levels of excellence.

Generation Y entered the workforce in the postmodern management 1990s, when managing the balance of work and life began to gain some traction (Helyer & Lee, 2012). This group challenged authority and set out to change employer practices more readily than had prior the generations before them. Michael Foucault’s (1998) writings on normativity assumes managers exert power in an attempt to regulate what workers perceive to be normal. As Generation Y’ers are more established in leadership echelons, the rejection of stayed ideals has become a cornerstone of their reputation. Promoting better work-life management and challenging traditional ideals mobilized a *différance* (Derrida, 1976), however it was only the

³ The Baby Boomer Generation is defined as those born between 1945-1965, Generation X between 1966-1976, and Generation Y are those born between 1977-1997.

beginning. Family and work are still seen as competing priorities, and the ideal worker often must sacrifice one for the other.

Human Relations and Enactment

Nearly 100 years ago, Mary Parker Follett pioneered a new mode of thought in management: The Human Relations School (1920). With her focus on enabling workers to realize their potential and manage their quality of life, she was ahead of her time. But why was this such a hard angle to accept? Were workers and the scholars writing about them not at all concerned with life experiences outside of work, and balancing the time they invested in both arenas? Perhaps it stems from Taylor and Weber's traditional ideals of management where a total dedication to work was the only thing that made sense. Follett understood that to avoid burn-out and disengagement, it was important to manage with a heartbeat.

In his seminal work, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969), Karl Weick presents organizations as social constructions that exist only in the minds of their members. He posits that managers are bounded by what they see as limitations, but which are actually deceptive conclusions which they themselves founded upon their own experiences and presumptions. In fact, the term "enactment" was selected to "emphasize that managers construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many 'objective' features of their surroundings" (p. 164). Organizing is likened to grammar in that behaviors are interlocked into social processes that are intelligible to the participants. Because members will follow their leaders in thoughts, values, and actions regardless of environmental cues, managerial behavior will ostensibly determine which actions are normalized and rewarded.

Making Sense of "Mom Hours"

Most mothers in post-industrial societies return to paid work after varying lengths of parental leave (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). In the United States, working mothers who return often find themselves caught between inconsistent social models: the ideal worker who is available at all times to her employer and the intensive parent who is always at the ready for her children (Correll, Kelly, O'Connor, & Williams, 2014). Studies suggest that working mothers in the U.S. are engaged with seeking the work-life balance noted by Follett, dedicating time to both their professions and their families. With this phenomenon, many U.S. companies have started to give significant focus to work-life initiatives in recent years (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). Seeking the means to help their employees deal with life stressors as well as fast-paced organizational change, companies work to both enhance business performance and enable their workforce to sustain personal as well as professional goals (Ollier-Malaterre, 2010).

Given these rational justifications for enabling mothers with flexible modes to work, why are we still having conversations about "mom hours"? Perhaps it is because declaring support for flexible work arrangements and enacting true representative behaviors are not the same thing.

In the United States, women are clearly the minority players in business leadership positions (Catalyst, 2017; Deloitte, 2017); thus, most workers' exposure to hegemony is limited. As demonstrated earlier, the precedent for accepting anything other than ideal worker behaviors has not been the traditional American way of business. Taylorism propelled a hegemony theory, positing that the ideal worker puts absolute dedication to work ahead of family or personal obligations (Kossek et al., 2010; Munsch, 2016). It has only been since the 1990s

that management has begun to acknowledge alternative means to accomplish workplace requirements via active discourse. Before that, and for generations, the way workers demonstrated loyalty and excellence was to be available at all times – the prototypical “company man.”

Hindering modern support for work-life balance and flexible work arrangements to support working mothers and other employees is the modern enactment of stigmatization. Cultural work-life support can be defined as relational and social support at work that increases individuals’ perceptions that employees who are jointly involved in family and work roles are fully valued (Kossek et al., 2010). Cultural support exists on two levels: the first is between managers and co-workers, and the second is when the organization establishes which norms and values are engendered (Kossek et al., 2010). To feel an organization supports mothers who work, managers must cultivate acceptance (Weick, 1969) of alternatives to the traditional worker model. Evidence of this came via the “Results Only Work Environment” (ROWE) flexibility structure at Best Buy which demonstrated the marriage of structure and support had a quantifiable return on investment (Correll, Kelly, O’Connor, & Williams, 2014; Moen, Kelly, & Hill, 2011).

Thus, it can be said that employers who authentically enact flexible work arrangements thoughtfully construct not only a structure, but a culture that nurtures and rewards those who take advantage of alternatives to Taylor’s ideals.

There is evidence that job applicants and employees alike value flexible work arrangements as a means to enable family-work management (Cegarra-Leiva, Sanchez-Vidal, & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012; Eek & Axmon, 2013; Konrad & Yang, 2012; Thompson, Payne, & Taylor, 2015; WorldatWork, 2015). However, even when companies offer flexible work arrangements such as flex-time, flex-space, and telecommuting, workers do not take full advantage of them. Evidence shows they are sometimes penalized for taking advantage of such programs in ways that include being passed up for training, promotions, and special projects (Allen, 2001; Konrad & Yang, 2012). Whether a mother leaves the office early to watch her child’s soccer game or to be at her ailing father’s bedside, she may feel judged sufficiently to discourage future use of flexible arrangements (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Despite the fact that Follett (1920) demonstrated the importance of managing workers as intricate humans who have outside drivers and needs, managers still seem to resent workers who take advantage of flexible work arrangements designed to do just that. The enacted reality of the workplace, valuing the traditional model of workplace above all else, propels these behaviors, reinforcing the restrictive golden halo of the “ideal” worker as well.

Conclusion

When it comes to changing the mold for what has come to be known as the “ideal worker,” what is dictating the enacted behaviors of managers? Certainly, history has set the precedent given the models scholars have established. Behaviors were identified as ideal, and with every generation, they seemingly became codified and reinforced along the way. Despite the many changes in the modern workplace, from Taylor’s mechanistic factory setting to the modern start-up company, the traditional view of “workplace first” has held sway. If only Mary Parker Follett were recognized sooner as the prophet of employee engagement.

In my example, it was not easy for the rising Director to find her way. Although the CEO felt it was appropriate to delay any promotion announcements until the business righted itself, this

did not happen quickly enough for her to continue the aggressive work schedule or to justify time away from her family. Although she rationalized that the title would have been worth it, her family emerged as the most important priority and she ultimately left the company for a role closer to home. She has made a personal commitment that, when given the opportunity, she will create a mold for her direct reports to feel safe and valued regardless of the face-time they provide at the office.

Each leader who begrudgingly makes accommodations for their workers' FWA or other modes of work-life management sends a message. While it is necessary to accept that employees have lives to fulfill outside of the workplace, any resistance enacts a continued allegiance to the ideal worker model and propels the sexist stigmatization against those who do not comply. As Generation Y becomes more prominent in leadership positions, working mothers may find more hope that the *différance* they seek to make can truly break the mold.

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About the Author

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Susan is an organizational effectiveness and leadership development specialist whose passion and expertise lie in values-based leadership development and profit-centered culture development. She has demonstrated results in designing and creating engaged workforces with direct business results and has segued this into Adjunct Faculty roles at both Babson College and Northeastern University where she instructs organizational behavior and management courses at both the undergraduate and MBA levels.

Susan's consulting niche is in entrepreneurial businesses that are "coming of age"; where the *people* business has recently been invited to the table. Susan has engaged with companies ranging from 8 to 8,000 employees, serving in roles to develop and guide talent and leadership development. Susan has also led Change Management initiatives ranging from organizational re-engineering to culture and human resource assimilation preparing for and

in the aftermath of leadership changes, mergers, and acquisitions. Susan's work facilitating troubled teams has also helped them to overcome obstacles to their success.

Susan holds her undergraduate degree in Communication and Human Resource Development from James Madison University and a Master's Degree in Leadership Studies from Harvard University. She is also certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), Predictive Index (PI), Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and in DiSC. She is also a current EdD candidate at Northeastern University, focusing her research on how flexible work arrangements can facilitate talent retention.

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