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Coping with conflict in the executive family

Barrie S. Greiff

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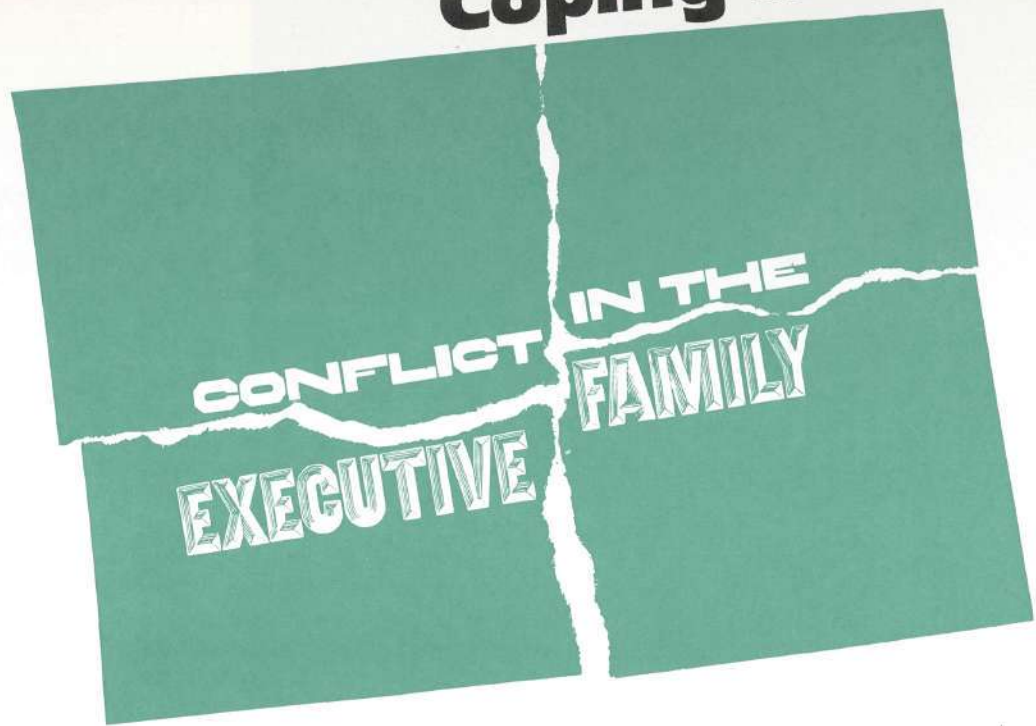
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Coping with



An Interview with Barrie S. Greiff, M.D.

At the Firm's management seminars attended by new partners and directors over the past three years, Dr. Barrie S. Greiff has led a discussion on ways to deal with the conflicting pulls of work and home. A practicing psychiatrist, Dr. Greiff teaches a unique course, which he originated, on "The Executive Family" at the Harvard Business School. The course is intended for couples, so both husband and wife attend the sessions. At least one of the spouses must be enrolled in the Harvard MBA program.

H&S Reports conducted this interview with Dr. Greiff in order to bring to its readers some of the concerns that have been brought out in his course at Harvard and in the Firm seminars.

Did your course on "The Executive Family" start in the MBA program at Harvard?

Yes, because I wanted both husbands and wives in the course initially. The average age of the Harvard MBA student is twenty-seven, so this was a wonderful opportunity to bring together a group of people who had previous business experience. I wanted as heterogeneous a group as possible, i.e., those with previous business experience, those newly married, ten-year-married couples, those with children and without, and so forth. We included a number of topics, such as the effects of travel and relocation, promotion and success, job loss, stress within and outside the organization, as well as methods of coping with these stressful situations. I felt that if we were to look at these phenomena it would give the couple an advantage prior to their entrance into the business world, or their return to it, so they might better cope with these normal human dilemmas.

Did you discuss the two-career family, in which both husband and wife have a career to consider?

Yes. We are seeing more and more families where the wife as well as the husband has a career. By that I mean not just a job, but a career. I predict this will be the biggest single factor affecting American family life in the next twenty-five years. The career

wife will face traveling, relocation and so forth just as her husband does. And at times there will be considerable conflict as to whose career comes first.

For instance, some couples who have dual careers think they can live apart in separate cities, commute on weekends and have a viable relationship. That may be attractive in a theoretical sense — the difficulty comes in practicing this style of living.

Did a lot of students in your course try to express their concerns before they took the course, but not really focus on them? Does the course help them bring out into the open what had bothered them before?

Yes, it did. I asked them at the start to give their reasons for taking the course, and we tried to address the issues they raised. For example:

To become more familiar with the lifestyle of a business-oriented family

To understand how the husband-wife concerns may conflict

To understand the effect of changing employers or losing a job

To learn how to apportion time between business and family

To help me handle a husband with a high-pressure job

Do you have guest speakers at the Harvard seminar?

Yes. A number of very interesting speakers have participated in the seminar, representing a number of different businesses and styles of living. For instance, an executive vice president of a major New York bank talked about living abroad. He and his family had lived in the Far East for seventeen years. A couple who jointly owned a leisure-industry conglomerate discussed how they operated their unique business together. Another was a Harvard Business School graduate who had lost his job as a result of a merger. It is quite obvious that I have tried to expose the students to as many interesting and varied couples as possible. I've even had people who admit readily that they have no family life because they're too darn busy. In short, my purpose in bringing in these guests is to help the students establish their own life strategies, based on exposure to a number of situations.

How common is the conflict between the job pull and the family pull?

I think it's very common, particularly when you have bright, intense, aggressive, talented people whom everybody wants to get for his organization.

What do you see as the main source of conflict between the job and the home with a professional manager in a large organization?

Time. I think the main source of conflict is juggling time so as to do justice to each — yourself, your family, your organization and your community — and doing it in such a way that you are not out of breath all the time.

If the conflict takes the form of a struggle for the parent's time and energy, does the family often feel disappointment?

It's not just the family that's disappointed, it is the executive as well. Most executives I have met are quite genuine about their commitments; hence they are constantly establishing priorities. The successful executive is imaginative and creative in trying to work out a reasonable balance between business and family life. Some tend to displace their frustration onto the organization. While it is true that many organizations are demanding on individuals, it is important for the executive to negotiate a compromise with the organization so as to balance personal, family and corporate life.

Sometimes the executive appears to be offering his family something special. For instance, he might say, "Let's take a vacation!" That can be a great experience, or it can turn into one of the most disastrous scenes in the world. The vacation should not represent all the stored-up affection that has compounded during the year and then be condensed in a two-week period. You can't just overload somebody with affection. One of your kids might say, "I don't want to go on a vacation." If you insist that you're all going on a vacation and the kids resist, then the father might wonder, "What the heck is happening around here? I've worked my head off all year, and now I am free to go on a vacation and some of you don't want to go. No one is appreciative." In short, he wants to take his family on vacation when he chooses, but he may have been totally insensitive to the fact that his family has wanted to see him more often during the year. And in fact some say, "You can't be a friend just two weeks of the year." It's like people who try to pack their weekly exercise into Saturday afternoon. They would be much better off doing a half hour's exercise a day for seven days.

What effect can the conflict between work and home have on job performance? Is it likely to distract an employee?

It may have a serious effect, as evidenced by periods in which attention and concentration may be impaired, where evidence of depression may manifest itself through restlessness, lack of interest in work, excessive drinking, inability to make decisions and fleeting physical disturbances without any organic causes. To be perfectly fair, there are some individuals whose job performance does not seem to be affected by family conflicts. These individuals have the capacity to "turn off" stress outside of the work environment and appear to function quite successfully at their job.

In the case of a supervisor in business who is a slave driver, whom top management looks on as a man who gets results — does management usually wake up to the fact that nobody wants to work for him? Does it get that supervisor sooner or later?

Yes and no. It depends very much on the company. Remember that employees react to both the expressed and the nonverbal communication of the company. There is nothing wrong with having a tough boss who makes people work hard, provided that he is fair, honest and genuinely sensitive to those around him.

Can you cite a case or two where a resolution of the job-versus-family conflict has taken place fairly easily? Is there a pattern to how this can be done? Is it largely through thought and introspection?

Awareness through introspection is only one of the steps associated with change. In addition, there must be a genuine motivation to change, as well as an action plan. Without these last two components, then all the insight and introspection in the world will not result in change. This means carefully thinking about one's plans, making certain decisions and then courageously acting upon them. Hence, when the time comes, everyone involved will have been prepared, allowing that individual under most circumstances to carry through his desired objective.

To come back to what you said before about depression — how does it affect the work organization?

I think the most common mental problem in the United States, bar none, is depression. There are a number of signs associated with depression, including excessive use of alcohol or drugs, being "accident prone," absenteeism, insomnia, excessive or diminished intake of food, inability to concentrate, profound feelings of inadequacy, procrastination, sexual disturbances, physical complaints without any organic cause, behavior out of character for that person — all of which may affect work performance. Of course, the most serious consequence of depression is suicide, which takes its toll of 25,000 to 50,000 individuals a year in this country.

In the case where the employed person is a man, do you think harmony can be reached, and can it be permanent, if the wife consistently goes along with the husband's wishes "to be a good sport"? Or does this only postpone an outbreak of the conflict under today's conditions? I realize that in the old days this was considered the ideal solution.

Under today's conditions you would just be sweeping the conflict under the rug. A wife who excessively suppresses her frustrations develops what I call a quiet volcano — that is, an internal time bomb that builds up anger and resentment and that under the proper conditions has the potential for explosion.

But do you think there are still some wives who are going to prefer the traditional role?

Definitely. There are going to be lots. Plenty of women prefer the traditional role and they should not be made to feel guilty about it. They should not awkwardly and artificially enter professions or specialties because they feel they should do it in order to gain the approval of their husbands. They should do it only if they choose to. I think that doing what's up to date means doing what you genuinely believe is right for you and experiencing the consequences. In some cases that means not doing anything in the world of outside work, but doing lots in the family world, the community, and so forth.

What can the employed professional do to allay the conflict between work and family?

There are a number of things: set aside time to talk with one's spouse, read, share experiences with others and perhaps participate in programs like the management seminars that Haskins & Sells runs for new partners, with which I have been associated over the past three years. Such a program is bound to make some people more sensitive to certain elements in their lives.

I suppose you have known some people, and I mean here the spouses of employed people, who sort of bottle up their frustrations, then go consult with a clergyman, or their mother, or a psychiatrist?

Yes, or to a best friend. I don't think you always have to go discuss your troubles with a psychiatrist. If you're fortunate enough to have just one trusted friend, be it a spouse, or friend, or clergyman, or whoever, that you can exchange ideas with, you're lucky. You are in good shape if you have one person who can help you see yourself, and hear yourself. Often, however, professional intervention is necessary in order to evaluate the situation objectively. This is particularly true for complex problems, i.e., depression, severe anxiety, phobias or a host of other situations with which the general public is not familiar.

Is there a way of evaluating career conflicts that people can try out for themselves?

Yes, they might sit down and ask themselves a number of questions, such as: Am I realistic about my current desires? Am I asking too much of myself? Do I really want to be a managing partner, and assume all the responsibility associated with the position? Do I wish to invest the time necessary to reach my goals? Do I really want to travel that much? Lots of individuals assume they would like to have the top position in the organization and yet not be accountable to anyone. That's a fantasy that many people share. If anything, as most of us know, the top position requires a strong sense of commitment with heavy responsibilities and a high degree of accountability.

What have employers done to try to reduce the conflict between job and home, other than things like the meetings you have held at Haskins & Sells?

There are a number of things that have been done in this country and in other countries. These programs are well referenced in the book *Work in America*, published by MIT Press. They include a number of interesting innovations like: (a) Flex-time, which means employees coming in when they want and leaving eight hours later; (b) the four-day work week; (c) the establishment of employee committees that are responsible for some of the decision making in an organization, including the salaries; and (d) an active physical exercise program for employees during the working day.

Do you believe that these conflicts between the job and the family can be foreseen by young people when they are just getting started in their profession or business organization? Can they be settled when you make a marriage commitment?

These complex phenomena have to be viewed at different stages of the life cycle, and you certainly can't see them all when you are just getting married, or just starting out in your work. What's important is that you can begin to work on them, and establish a dynamic orientation to life planning.

From your course at the Harvard Business School and from your practice, have you formed views on how to lead people to face the issues they are concerned about?

Let's be honest — there are no pat solutions. Each of us has our own special ways of coping with dilemmas. I have found the following eleven points to be helpful in dealing with individual, family and organizational conflicts. Many of the people in H&S have their own special ways of coping — and I'd be very much interested in hearing from them.

1. Maintain open communication with one another. Supply booster shots of recognition, love and concern.
2. Recognize that terms like success, goals and objectives are fluid ideas and subject to change at different stages of life.
3. Try to recognize problems early: don't play the ostrich game.
4. Learn to use your third eye and third ear. If your intuitive sense tells you something's important, pay attention — and follow up.
5. Learn to explore inner space. Know yourself, be aware of the effects of loss and gain, intimacy and distance in your life.
6. Develop a sense of "unlonely aloneness"; learn to enjoy spending time by yourself doing the things you enjoy.
7. Develop multiple satellites — develop things outside your direct sphere of work that give you pleasure — and other options.
8. Be adaptable; try to develop a personal perspective on what happens in life.
9. Learn to anticipate inevitable life crises and conflicts. Don't always ask, "Why me?" One can always ask, "Why not?"
10. In your personal auditing, ask yourself, "Who am I? What do I want? Is it realistic? Am I achieving it? If not, why not?"
11. Develop refueling techniques. A successful marriage isn't a chance phenomenon — it's an active process characterized by creative reciprocity. ◊