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The Childless Corporation: Where does the Family Fit in the Employee's Life?

We will argue that "ghettoization" of child care issues stems from the intense compartmentalization regarding who is to deal with such issues. That these issues are ghettoized flies in the face of what we know about the great overlap between job satisfaction and family life stress and the need to aid employees in maintaining stable child-care arrangements.

ONE THIRD OF CANADIAN FAMILIES HAVE children 14 years old and younger (Statistics Canada, 1993). The burden of their care often negatively impacts work performance (Barnett, 1994). Child-care responsibilities may contribute to higher levels of employee stress, absenteeism and turnover (Alvi, 1994). As such, one would assume that employers and employees, have some desire to address parent's needs regarding child-care. This is particularly the case since available daycare openings can only accommodate about 14% of those potentially in need of care (Alvi, 1994). Thus, most child-care arrangements may be short term or ad hoc and parent/employees may require further time off the job (Alvi, 1994.)

The need may be so great as to require employers to provide some sort of daycare assistance to employees (Friedman & Galinsky, 1992). This may come in the form of daycare referral services, financial assistance directly to the employee, or on or near site care centers whose development or maintenance is aided by the employer. The exact form that such employer action may take covers a wide range and is detailed in Friedman & Galinsky (1992).

While such actions are to be applauded, the vast majority of employers may have a significantly less tolerant attitude toward employees' child-care needs. Additionally, the attitudes which may permeate a corporation's culture may be so non-supportive of an employee's child-care needs, that whatever good can come from programs, will be tainted. We would go so far as to say this is because employee child care needs are generally not seen to be an issue of concern to anyone. Why this is so will become clearer shortly.

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Our Employees Do not Have to Care for Children

“He had to leave early because of a sick, what?”

“Child. You know, smaller people; about so high; cute as...”

“I know what a child is! Our employees do not have to care for children!”

If the above statements appeared in a Dilbert cartoon we would not be at all surprised. Yet, Dilbert depends on its characters saying what they are really thinking as a way to explain their absurd organizational behaviors. These statements do not quite do this – they however strike so close to what a manager might express that they lose their humor. While this perhaps overstates the case for what managers might say, one could argue that if such views are unchecked and widely held by the employees of an organization the employee with child-care needs may feel that the organization is effectively sending out the above Dilbert-type messages.

The authors have in some cases found reality equal to fiction. Note the following “real life” supervisor’s comment that was related to one of the authors by a parent:

“I need to know whose schedule conflicts with those suggested meeting times – and I only want to hear about real conflicts, not things like child-care arrangements or sports.”

The Empty Ghetto: Employees Who Have Child-Care Concerns

That employers or the workforce within an organization may have such attitudes that can be explained, in part, by who they may view as being responsible for child-care. In this sense, the heart of the problem seems to be the ghettoization of who we view as having such a responsibility. The ghetto is closed off by four walls. The first wall excludes parents with children outside of the one to thirteen age group. The second wall is the one which blocks off child-care responsibilities from men. The third wall excludes non-career woman. The last wall limits the child-care discussion regarding “career” women. When we add all that up we find a pretty empty ghetto. One which leaves no parents to care for the next generation

The first wall: *excluding parents with children outside of the one to thirteen age group.* Effectively, this is a way to look at child-care which allows both employers and employees to say the problem will pass with time. Much like college presidents of the 1960’s who had to suffer with student protests, corporation’s realize that the problem will go away – student’s graduate or flunk out and children eventually grow out of the need for daycare. For those with children in the 13 and under age group, life may be too busy to really mount any sustained objection to poor employer attitudes concerning child-care issues. Those parents with children over the age of 13, no longer have the same concern since by-and-large such children can care for themselves as latchkey children. Such parents are through with the issue and may perceive difficulties with child-care as simply coming with having children.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of women with children under five who have entered the workforce in the last decade and require daycare. Members of this group often end up in conflict with on-the-job parents who have children in the over 13 age group. It is likely that a good number of these parents (particularly those with grown children), never had to contend with daycare

arrangements during the preschool years. This is because the mother often stayed at home with the children.

Men who fall into the “with children over the age of 13” category often have little sympathy for working parents since they also worked while their children were young. They often forget that the child-care and home responsibilities were largely borne by their wives. Taking time off work to take children to medical appointments, being unavailable for late meetings due to stringent daycare pick up times, spending weekends and evenings attending parent meetings, ferrying children to their activities, and doing housework are usually beyond the ken of the man who had a homemaker wife during their children’s early years. Women who did not work when their children were preschoolers may similarly fail to understand the pressures of dual-income or single parent families, or may feel it is more natural for the woman to decide to care for children full time at home, as they did.

Understanding and sustained concern from parents of older children is difficult under such circumstances. Even short lived concern, as we will discuss below, is compartmentalized in such a way as to drastically reduce our perception of the numbers of those remaining parents who are concerned with child-care of the children in this age group.

The second wall: *blocking off child-care responsibilities from men.* Daycare age children, by the fact that they are in daycare, are not in need specifically of parental care. Yet when it comes to emergency care, mothers are usually the ones we think of as to be called upon. With the exception of nursing infants there is no physical reason to expect that one parent is more or less capable of caring for a child than the other parent. While the logic to this may seem apparent, women are still seen as the primary caregivers and employers are loath to change that attitude. Witness the following quote from Emlen (1993: 61):

I have found my company to be very intolerant of me as the husband and father to take time off to be with a sick child during working hours. They (management) have even gone so far as to suggest that it is or should be the responsibility of my wife, who holds a management position in another firm, to assume the responsibility of staying home with a sick child. I personally find the personnel policies of my firm and their attitude toward this situation to border on stone age mentality

Other comments related to the authors regarding men’s child-caring role echo these sentiments. In reaction to parental leave, one man whose wife (also a manager) was on 6 months of parental leave stated “If they can do without me for 6 weeks, they can do without me forever. I couldn’t take that kind of career risk.” In reaction to accepting part-time work, one male parent stated, “I had to pretend I wanted part-time because I was going back to school. They couldn’t understand the fact that I wanted to stay home with my children.”

Men pay a heavier career burden for violating the expectation that they should be solely committed to work than do women (individually). Men find it more difficult to negotiate part-time work arrangements, take parental leaves and turn down travel and relocation demands. They face considerable pressure not only from their managers, but also their peers, who do not understand. Men who do negotiate these options are seen as non-contenders for career advancement, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as opportunities for learning and visibility are given to others (Kanter, 1977).

The natural implication of this logic, as many women will attest, is that the assumption that women will have primary responsibility for their children precludes them from *ever* being seen as contenders for promotion at all. Though they may not experience the same sort of pressure that is applied to men around family accommodations, they may also be missing promotional opportunities that involve relocations, high-visibility assignments that involve travel, or training assignments that may eventually lead to relocations or travel. One of the most insidious things about this assumption is that it is tied to gender, not individual circumstances. Thus women who have the flexibility to juggle their family responsibilities, and even women who do not have families, may be subject to these same exclusions of career opportunities.

The assumption that women have primary care responsibilities for children puts both genders in boxes. Men are discouraged from sharing responsibility for and closeness with their children, and women are denied career options in what are sometimes well-meant attempts to be sensitive to their family circumstances.

Assuming that women should and do bear the sole burden of child-care responsibilities ignores both the ideal and reality of family life. The ideal is that children should have two parents who play an active role in their lives. While we have come to expect that both parents will contribute to family income, men in dual income families also seem to take a greater responsibility for child-care arrangements than in single income families or years past. In dual income families 54% of fathers reported that they shared responsibility for child-care arrangements; as opposed to 11% in single income families (Emlen, 1993). While such numbers are encouraging, they also show that within most families woman are considered to have primary responsibility for child-care.

Though the ideal may be that men and women play a part in their children's lives, the reality is that, in many cases, single parenthood forces both men and woman into very dedicated roles in their children's lives. With approximately 2.5% of Canadian families headed by single fathers and 12.5% headed by single mothers (Statistics Canada, 1997) child-care responsibilities may fall exclusively to one parent. The fact that lone female parent households outnumber the lone male parent households five-to-one reinforces the perception of woman as the principle caregiver. That single father households have increased by 25% over the last five years shows that there is some small increase in the primary role fathers are willing to take in their children's lives.

The actions of divorce courts may force men, especially in situations where there is joint custody, to play a more active role in their children's lives. With half of all marriages ending in divorce the active role one parent may play relative to another is at odds with employer's perceptions of the Ozzie and Harriet nuclear family. Yet, traditionally woman have sought and received custody and statistics stated above support the idea that in most cases children may remain with the female parent through divorce and remarriage. Effectively, this allows for the collective illusion that child-care is a women's issue. As such, child-care issues can be addressed differently by career versus non-career women.

The third wall: *excluding non-career woman from child-care issues.* Women not in the workforce or part time female employees can also be excluded from discussion. Either group could be seen to have flexible enough schedules to meet full time or ad-hoc child-care demands. The combined effects of the three ghetto walls work to exclude at least 75% of the population from those who might

relevantly be involved in arguing for changes in attitudes regarding a person's role as both employee and parent.

The last wall: *limiting the child-care discussion regarding "career" women.* This is essentially an argument that female employee parents should be as unconcerned with child-care issues as their male counterparts. If women wish to get ahead in organizations, they must minimize the degree to which they are seen as having "family issues". To bring up family concerns is to give up some of the power and credibility which career women often only tenuously own.

This situation is similar to what Kanter (1977) called "status leveling": women in high-profile career tracks may be perceived to be like the stereotype of all women (i.e., having primary responsibility for the care of children), with the negative consequences for their careers discussed earlier. Ambitious women must be very careful to differentiate themselves from the stereotypical view of women as caregivers as much as possible, to avoid status leveling. They must look and act even more like the dominant power group (who are all acting as if family issues don't exist), then dominant power group members in order to obtain acceptance. This often involves denigrating the choices of others which don't fit the dominant power group norms (Kanter, 1977).

Women who have supported the norm that family issues don't belong at work may have difficulty supporting the reverse position even after they have obtained power and status within the dominant group. Indeed, many of these women, particularly in the most traditional or conservative environments, are likely to believe themselves that family issues don't belong at work, since they have spent their working careers supporting the dominant group norms. The end result is that the most powerful women in corporations are not those who can be expected to initiate dialogue about the need for firms to consider work/family concerns.

Those women who admit they have "family issues" are encouraged to enter the "Mommy Track" (see Schwarz, 1989) and settle for an alternate career path. Mommy Track employees are often in tenuous positions in organizations: they are likely to be the most expendable in times of downsizing, and their commitment to the organizations is often called into question. They do not have the power required to make or demand changes in employer responses to child-care issues, since part-time workers are usually themselves ghettoized outside the dominant power group. Many of them have accepted the role as primary caregiver and express gratitude that their employers have accommodated their need to look after their children. They are not as likely to press for further changes regarding child-care arrangements. Others are resentful that they must shoulder the family burden and diminish their own options because the "Daddy Track" doesn't exist. This resentment is often directed at their partners, however, not organizations.

The combined effects of eliminating the two-thirds of all parents who do not have children under 14 years old, eliminating the half of those parents that are male, the 40% of the remaining females who do not work full-time outside the home (Statistics Canada 1991) and those woman who decry the Mommy Track we are left with the collective illusion that the only ones who care much about child-care are those who have elected to sacrifice some of their career progress to raise their family. Essentially, we have created an empty ghetto where the only occupants are those who, to perhaps a great extent, acquiesce in accepting the attitudes of employers regarding child-care. The other side of this issue is that those representatives who may have the power to deal with whatever anomalous employees who still have child-care concerns represent a relatively sparse group.

The Almost Empty Shop: Employer Representatives Who Can Address Child-Care Concerns

While high levels of employee stress, absenteeism and turnover brought on by child-care responsibilities may directly impact line functions like production or sales, it remains the responsibility of the staffing function to address the issue. It is the nature of the functional organization of a business that expertise in an area be concentrated in a department. Yet, the list of projects that a human resources department could get involved with is long, and the risk of taking on a project in which the department is seen as being on the side of the employee instead of the employer can undermine the department's own tenuous credibility within the organization.

The perception that few parents have child-care concerns that the employer can address can lead employers to neglect the issue. Additionally, since having and raising children is an activity which occurs outside of work, with little direct impact on workplace performance and is a matter of free choice, employers often perceive little reason to concern themselves with the issue. Thus, though the ghettoization of concerned parents and the seemingly benign neglect of employer representatives there may be little in the way of change occurring in employer's attitudes toward employee's obligations.

What Needs to Be Done

In one of the many responses to the idea of the Mommy Track, Douglas T. Hall (1990) proposed a number of recommendations regarding work/family balance. His first suggestion was that top management needed to examine their assumptions regarding what are "good" executives, parents and careers. He also recommended that top managers create a mechanism by which a corporate-wide dialogue concerning work/family balance could begin.

While we concur with Hall's recommendation we would also stress an additional point: While employers want employees who take their responsibilities seriously, the recognition by everyone in the organization that an employee who attends to parental responsibilities is a valuable employee will go a long way to helping reduce the stress parent employees face. This means that top executives must stress the importance of work/family throughout the organization – much like they should do with corporate ethics.

More than just lip-service, organizations must be willing to examine their career and promotion tracks, flexible work options, travel demands, relocation requirements, after hours demands (e.g., weekend meetings and conferences), and organizational norms around parental responsibilities in order to identify those areas where work and family boundaries overlap. A first step is to stop the ghettoization of people we feel should have child-care concerns and realize that the responsibility for the next generation belongs to the community, including the corporate citizen.

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