

Different Strokes for Different Folks!

Clearly people are at their most productive when they are healthy, happy and have some control in their lives. In fact stress is inversely related in virtually all situations to the amount of control we have. So allowing employees more control is a really good thing. With that in mind, *wise leaders should consider how we might better support our employees' needs to have more control, especially over their scarcest resource- time!*

In traditional workplaces, not enough thought is given to this. The effects become quite obvious when looking at the struggle that many people have fitting in their personal and family needs with an inflexible work schedule. This amplifies the stress in the lives of our employees as they try to attend to the health needs of themselves and their dependents, get their kids to and from school and their activities, care for aging parents... well you get it, the list goes on and on.

It's unfortunate that in many workplaces work life balance issues are seen to be exclusively the employee's responsibility. Parenting issues for example, are not seen to be at all relevant to the business of the employer- employees often feel they have to actually conceal home concerns.

In these workplaces, the view of bosses is that work and personal issues are separate, and they seek to avoid discussion of family matters when they arise. Staff can feel isolated and alone with their problems- with little in the way of support within the workplace and inflexible work schedules, motivation, productivity and retention can suffer.

Contrasting that, in 'workplaces of choice' (what many employers these days say they are, or at least wish to become) bosses and others more clearly recognize that people at work 'have a life'. The quality of that life is valued by the employer as the linkage to performance, morale and ultimately the success of the organization is recognized. People are encouraged in their efforts to keep a healthy and effective balance between their work and their needs and commitments away from the job.

Here, bosses show an interest in their employees as people and are more alert to what is happening in their lives. People feel valued and 'connected' in the workplace. *Bottom line?* The business thinks longer term, and employees less often fail and burn-out.

Work-life balance facts (show as side bar perhaps??)

- Absences due to work life conflict have doubled in recent years and are estimated to be costing over \$4 billion a year in Canada.
- Work life conflict affects most people, not just those with children
- Many people with conflict in their life point to work as a major cause.
- In companies struggling to retain valued employees, failure to support work-life balance is often a major contributing factor.

So why not think of work options that afford the employee increased flexibility so they can better respond to the competition for their time and attention, between work and home? There is one option I liked most when I was an employee- one that recognizes that no two human beings are exactly the same and that we are subject to different needs and pressures. What I'm talking about is getting away from the 'in the box' mindset that everyone must work the same days, the same number of hours and the same shifts at the same locations. As I've said in previous columns, I much prefer to ask employees "what works best for you?"

I'm suggesting that wherever possible, employers would do far better to accept and even encourage flexibility in work arrangements including openness to alternate work schedules and compressed hours of work. Avoid taking a 'cookie cutter' approach to work arrangements. As a further example, be open to telecommuting and other arrangements that will not only allow the work to get done, but also may yield a happier more productive employee! Remember, happy employees tend to want to stay!

As we see our employees heading out the door at the end of each day, we can make it more likely they will have well-deserved opportunities to spend quality time with their families and others- recharging their bodies, minds and creative spirits. Flexibility in work schedules can directly contribute to that result and often the work can be designed so that it's done just as well using alternate arrangements- sometimes even performed more efficiently at less cost! Happy thoughts to you!