

Executives of the Electronic Corporation: On the Daddy Track

“The more I understand the real skills of leadership in a learning organization, the more I become convinced that these are the skills of effective parenting.”

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Introduction

When we discuss the electronic corporation, which constantly integrates and adapts new technologies as a fundamental element of its success, it is important to acknowledge that such evolution does not occur in a vacuum. The interaction of technology and societal norms both within the enterprise and more broadly across society is an elegant dance that managers must consider if they hope to successfully motivate and keep their best and brightest. Thus, with the agreement of my editors, I will occasionally branch out into social or cultural transitions which are paralleling the evolution of the electronic corporation and which influence how new technologies can best be applied to the organization.

My first "digression" is central to numerous informal hallway discussions among middle managers I speak with every day, but is rarely brought up to senior management. The subject is the integration of work and family in the lives of key executive men. It is probably one of the most substantial transitions currently effecting business today and will be a critical issue for anyone building the corporation of the future - which, by definition, will be an electronic corporation. By becoming a central issue for executive men, it will radically change how companies relate to the families of their employees, their male executives, and just as importantly, their female executives. In fact, this sea change in social attitudes may be the quiet pin drop which finally shatters the "glass ceiling," filling a large percentage of executive positions with highly qualified women. As executive men assume gender roles in the home that are traditionally the purview of women, the values and managerial styles considered critical to success in senior executives will shift to styles that make it easier to promote women into the executive suite.

Male Executives: The Struggle to Balance Work and Active Parenting

This trend has yet to really impact senior executives. A 1986 study by Dianne Burden and Bradley Googins, two leading experts on work-family conflict, examined 711 employees at two Fortune

500 corporations. Their research found that married men with wives at home were disproportionately represented in upper-management high-salaried positions. This is still true, even today. For proof of this, we need only look as far as the home life of Silicon Valley's leading executives.

The impact on careers of both male and female employees who have a different view of work-family balance is substantial. To quote the study: "In other words, those making the management decisions and setting human resources policy for the workforce may have little firsthand knowledge of the lifestyles and multiple job and home life responsibilities of the great majority of their employees."

Burden and Googin's study was performed in 1986. Numerous studies since then not only confirm that employees are feeling work-family conflict, but that the percentage of employees impacted is increasing.

What is most interesting, however, is that studies confirm that men, as much or more so than women, are increasingly experiencing these conflicts - more than anyone previously thought. A survey performed by Merck and Company in the mid 80's found that "40 percent of men and 37 percent of women [with teenage children] experienced high work family conflict." Another survey of 1,200 employees at a Minneapolis company found "higher percentages of fathers than mothers reported difficulties with childcare (72% vs 65%).

In addition, fathers of different socioeconomic classes do not report differing levels of work-family conflict. What this implies is that we are witnessing a widespread phenomenon among American men, one that is as likely to impact a fast-track senior executive as it is the middle manager who has decided to sacrifice career advancement in return for more family time.

This trend seems to be the result of interlocking social trends. As married women have moved into the work force, they are spending substantially less time on household maintenance and childcare. The statistics show that married men in the workforce have effectively increased their time on household maintenance and childcare by almost the exact amount that their spouses have decreased, to the point where married men spend just slightly less time than their spouses on household duties. In other words, some significant portion of gender roles is equalizing between men and women.

Whether as a result of such role equalization, or because of other social factors, this generation of fathers has a very different attitudes toward fathering. Fathers increasingly want the ability to strive for

high achievement and spend time with their family. Studies consistently show this fundamental change from the older model (termed the *manana* model by Fernando Bartolo me of Harvard Business School) where male managers willing pushed off family concerns into the future.

These data have implications for today's families, and for today's working fathers, that are profound and, until now, largely ignored. This lack of acknowledgement has two sources. The first is the press - who have chosen as a rule to focus only on the extremes of behavior. Media focus has either centered on full-time, stay-at-home fathers ("Mr. Mom") or on father's who have run away from their responsibilities to their family. The more important cause is working men themselves. Like women before them, these men have created an unintentional conspiracy of silence for fear of being pigeonholed into a second-tier career, or "daddy track." How many men (and women) reading this article have ever quietly left the office at 5:30PM to pick up their children at day care, or left a meeting early claiming "another meeting" when in fact they needed to pick up their children - engaging in these behaviors out of fear that leaving work early for family reasons would be perceived as a lack of commitment to the company?

Surprise: What's Good For Daddy is Good for The Company

Managers of electronic corporations would be well-advised to pay attention to this trend, and work to help their employees - especially male employees - create an integrated work-family environment.

There are five critical and solid business reasons for doing this:

1. **Employee Retention.** High achievers in today's electronic corporation, whether male or female, almost certainly have coparenting responsibilities. Helping reduce their stress in balancing work and family will be considered a key employee benefit and will enhance retention of these critical resources.
2. **Increased Employee Commitment.** A 1992 study at St. Paul Companies found that "staff who believed work was causing problems in their personal lives were much more likely to make mistakes than those who had few job-related personal problems (30 percent compared with 19%). A study released by DuPont in October, 1995 found that employees who use work-life programs are 45% more likely to "go the extra mile" to assure that DuPont succeeds. Study after study shows that there is a

direct correlation between a supportive work environment as defined by the companies work-life programs and increased employee commitment.

3. **Improved Profitability.** These same studies show that companies can actually measure a positive ROI from these programs. First Tennessee National Corp. started treating family issues as part of business strategy. It found that "supervisors rated by their subordinates as supportive of work-family balance retained employees twice as long as the bank average and kept 7 percent more retail customers.... (contributing) to a 55% profit gain over two years."

4. **Healthier, Well-Adjusted Children.** Studies consistently show that the involvement of fathers in their children's lives has important, positive impacts at every stage of development. This includes higher reading levels, better math competence, more willingness of children to take initiative and direct themselves, as well as reduced drug use, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy. Considering the costs companies bear today in dealing with the results of these issues (such as remedial training programs needed to bring employees math or reading skills to needed levels), it is clear that helping employees develop well-adjusted children is in the company's best short-term and long-term interest.

But there is an even more subtle point to be made here. Senior executives at corporations are the company's best and brightest leaders, with the best people and organizational skills. By being active parents, we might hope that at least some of these skills would transfer by example to the next generation. Such transfer would ensure that a fundamentally higher level of leadership skill and managerial competence can be brought to bear as the next generation enters the workforce. Instead of having children who resent "the company" because it took daddy or mommy away from them too often, and who avoid business careers because of this resentment, companies would have an enhanced foundation on which to build their future. Admittedly, a company must take a long-term view, but given the immediate returns generated by work-life programs, it should be fairly easy to make this investment in the company's future.

5. **Parenting Skills Enhance Management and Leadership** It has been my experience, and those of other active fathers I work with, that many of the skills we develop handling family situations are often skills we need to manage teams in the electronic corporation. A funny personal anecdote. I used to say "no" a lot more to people making requests of me. The result was I was perceived as being difficult to deal with. When I had the opportunity to deal with my young son, I learned very quickly that "No" worked very badly as a management tool. Instead, I learned to give my child two choices. This empowered him, made him feel in control, and got me a lot more cooperation in the long term. Today, I use that same technique extensively at work. The result is I get a great deal more cooperation from coworkers, and an improved perception of my style.

Harvard University psychologist William Pollack has looked specifically at the connection between the skills of being a good father and a good manager or leader. Pollack writes: "Modern leaders, male and female, need creative vision, emotional flexibility, independent decision-making capacity, along with the ability to work within systems, creative networks and teams. They must also be able to rally support and achieve results in the midst of almost constant organizational change. My consulting experience and research have shown that, for men, those very skills are the ones most successfully learned and mastered by the well-adapted father."

CONCLUSION

I do not doubt that many women executives reading this will feel both vindicated and frustrated. Vindicated, on the one hand, because men are finally experiencing the same struggles that they have faced for at least the last ten years. Struggles, I might add, that they have suffered in relative silence because little or no support was forthcoming from the executive suite, where men with spouses at home could not or would not understand the burdens they faced balancing career and family commitments. Frustrated, on the other, because it is only now that men are effected by these trends that corporate culture at the highest levels can change. While nothing can change the past, the good news is that the shift in attitudes towards work-family integration for both men and women is changing. The senior executive of the future, whether male or female, will be an active parent. The executive trying to build the electronic corporation of today,

if they hope to retain their best and brightest as leaders of the future, will have to respect the needs of these young leaders. By helping them balance both their business role and their parenting role in a way that leads to them to feel satisfied with their lives, corporations will ensure their long-term success while increasing their profits today.