

Everybody at ClarityBase seemed to understand when one account manager—a working mother—got a special deal: Fridays off, limited travel, easy clients. But when other employees—namely, nonparents—started asking for similar treatment, the company found itself on the brink of an organizational firestorm.

Mommy-Track Backlash

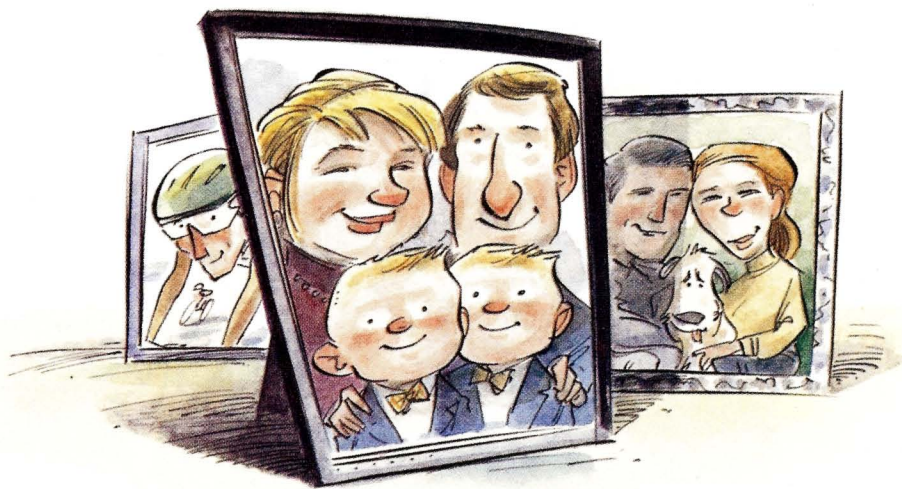


ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL VASCONCELLOS

by Alden M. Hayashi

PLEASE DON'T TELL ME that I need to have a baby to have this time off."

Those words were still ringing in the ears of Jessica Gonon an hour after a tense meeting with one of her key managers. As she sat in her office trying to make sense of a recent customer survey, Jessica, the vice president of sales and customer support at ClarityBase, was having trouble concentrating on the bar graphs and pie charts in front of her. Snippets from her earlier conversation kept interrupting her thoughts.

The issue seemed simple enough. Jana Rowe, an account manager in the sales support department, had requested a lighter workload: she wanted a four-day workweek, and for that she was willing to take a corresponding 20% cut in pay. Those were the simple facts, but the situation at ClarityBase was anything but straightforward.

Just last week, Davis Bennett, another account manager, had made a similar request. He wanted a lighter workload so he could train for the Ironman Tri-



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The goal is equity, not equality. Everyone’s life outside of work should be treated with respect, but not necessarily identically. Jessica needs to embrace her employees’ diversity by supporting their different passions. If she makes an effort to meet the personal-life needs of each individual on her staff, she will increase the vitality and commitment of her department.

The key is flexibility, which has to run both ways, from organization to employee and vice versa. To encourage this two-way flow, Jessica should let her staff know what the dilemmas are and work with them to find solutions. Jessica should meet with each of the eight account managers individually and say, “I want to create an environment where we all respect and support one another, in terms of both our business and personal goals. I’d like for us all to talk about our expectations—in all areas of our lives—as a group. Then we can begin to figure out collectively how to meet those expectations in creative ways that benefit all facets of each person: work, home, community, and self.”

Jessica must encourage both Jana and Megan to participate in the discussion, touchy as this might be. Jessica might explain to them that if all team members share their personal priorities, then the opportunities for easy fixes or for leveraging complementary or synergistic interests increase, for the benefit of all. “For example,” Jessica might say, “if you were writing a novel in your spare time and Davis were having trouble with his customer Blackhill and Hansen Publishing, you might switch clients with him so that you could develop editorial con-

tacts at B&H.” The subtext here, and the main message to her team, is, “We’re all in this together.”

To arrive at win-win solutions, Jessica and her team must recognize and discuss the demands of the business as well as life outside ClarityBase. This is the essence of what I call “total leadership,” which integrates work, home, community, and self. Because ClarityBase has only valued the personal life goals linked to parenthood, there’s a legitimate sense of resentment among those without kids at the company. All the more reason for each individual to express what’s most important to him or her and for Jessica to encourage employees to recognize, respect, and support those priorities.

This discussion is the tricky part, but it’s also where the real breakthroughs occur. People must be encouraged to assume that there are opportunities for achieving their goals in different ways—inside and outside of work—so they don’t take a rigid position of, say, “I have to have Thursday mornings off.” If employees state their expectations without asserting fixed positions or demands, the dialogue will take off from there.

In looking for creative solutions, Jessica and her team should consider dif-

ferent ways to satisfy customers, especially through the use of technology. Some clients might accept—even welcome—more e-mail and voice mail communications to cut down on the need for face-to-face meetings.

And to ensure that individuals are treated equitably, the team must consider whether certain account managers should receive higher compensation for handling more demanding clients. Perhaps each customer should have a degree-of-difficulty rating. With such a system, some account managers might even prefer difficult clients because of the higher compensation.

That’s where Ed, the call-center supervisor, went wrong in scheduling his staff for Labor Day. He made assumptions about what people wanted without establishing a dialogue about what was most important to them. For all he knew, some people might have preferred working on holidays, especially if they would be paid extra for it.

Bill in HR uses the word “accommodate,” implying a traditional, zero-sum approach to the connection between work and personal life. Jessica should instead look for synergies across the different domains of her staff’s lives. By doing so, she might better tap into their passions and gain the benefits of total leadership: better business results and enriched lives. ▢

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