

MARKETPLACE

WEDNESDAY, MAY 8, 1996 B1

WORK & FAMILY

BY SUE SHELLENBARGER

Enter the 'New Hero':
A Boss Who Knows
You Have a Life

THE TOPIC, managing employees with work-life conflicts, is hardly at the top of most corporate agendas, but it had eight top-rated managers in a focus group at Merck on the edge of their chairs.

Asked how employees respond when their bosses handle work-life issues with flexibility and respect, the managers sound like a Greek chorus. "An increase in loyalty, a willingness to work very hard. And there's a productivity improvement," says one senior director. Three others murmur agreement: "I believe it." One adds: "It's a motivational tool."

"So why don't more managers do it?" the moderator asks.

The results "aren't measurable," a manager replies. A vice president adds: "You just have to believe it."

The dialogue sheds light on the lonely ground occupied by many skillful managers these days. Many are turning out three times as much work with half as many people as in the past. Yet the "soft," almost instinctive, managerial skills that often best motivate employees — building trust, respecting others' values, honoring their personal lives — aren't talked about much in Management 101 or in corporate goal-setting.

The focus group at the drug maker's New Jersey headquarters was part of a larger research effort that aims to close that gap. The Wharton-Merck Roundtable, a group of about 20 managers from big employers and professors from leading universities organized by the Wharton School and Merck, is identifying the skills needed by individuals and managers to achieve life balance and

help others do the same. The results will be published in a resource guide; Merck, Cigna and Marriott International and other members plan to use the findings in management training and planning.

MERCK'S DIRECTOR of human-resource strategy, Perry Christensen, sees the skills as "the wave of managing in the future." As command-and-control management techniques go out of favor, "there's a 'new hero' manager we want to come out of the woodwork," he says. "A lot of people exercise these skills behind closed doors. We're trying to bring the practices out in the open as models" of enlightened management.

In the first of two columns on managing work-life issues amid heavy layoffs, here are some of the 10 skills identified by the Roundtable, with focus-group examples of their effects:

Reward performance and productivity, not necessarily time spent working.

Working killer hours and traveling 30% of the time, including weekends, Rose Arnone used to get mad at a previous boss when she had to report to her desk at 8 a.m. Monday. The supervisor (who has since left Merck) expected lots of face time, no matter how little sleep employees got as a result. Ms. Arnone kept up her performance but her attitude took a dive. She felt, "OK, I'll do the best I can, but you're not getting any more from me." In a symbolic gesture, she kept her office door closed.

Her next boss, in contrast, made goals clear, then told Ms. Arnone, "I trust you to get your job done." The result: "I was completely loyal to her and much more enthusiastic about my work," says Ms. Arnone, a research manager. (She has started keeping her office door open again, too.)

Live by your values and encourage others to live by theirs.

Lori Kaufman and Linda Hoffman have different styles of managing working motherhood. After maternity leave, Ms. Hoffman was tormented by the long separations from her baby required by her high-pressure job. Ms. Kaufman says jokingly she is seen as "more of an ice queen;" she has cared for her two kids without missing a beat at work.

DESPITE THEIR different styles, Ms. Kaufman, senior director, corporate accounting, didn't criticize Ms. Hoffman, an accounting manager, when she turned to Ms. Kaufman for help easing her conflict. Instead, she mulled the problem, lying awake that night until, in a midnight brainstorm, she solved it with a plan for Ms. Hoffman to job-share. Ms. Kaufman's support "amazes me," Ms. Hoffman says; it averted performance problems Ms. Hoffman feared she might develop, and inspired loyalty to Ms. Kaufman and Merck as well.

Build relationships based on trust and respect.

Senior financial analyst Diane Schweizer didn't expect to get time off when her toddler needed tonsil surgery during Merck's year-end rush. To her surprise, her boss Bob Underwood, controller for Merck's European operations, "just looked at me and said, 'Your daughter comes first,'" Ms. Schweizer says.

The gesture fostered intense loyalty. Later, she was leaving on a long-planned vacation at the shore when Mr. Underwood's assistant called for help preparing data for the head of Merck's European operations. Without hesitating, she "popped into the car and I was there," she says. "You don't think twice" when such a boss needs help, she says.

Fourteen other focus groups at Merck, Allied Signal and Johnson & Johnson yielded similar examples. Stewart Friedman, a professor at Wharton and a Roundtable co-organizer with Mr. Christensen and Jessica DeGroot, says the results shed light on a pressing question: "How do you generate commitment in an era where presumably, loyalty is dead?"

If the skills were applied broadly, he adds, "the potential business impact is big."