

Parent power: How raising children can make you a better manager



Becoming a parent obviously changes one's personal life. However, the effects of such a monumental event often extend beyond the home front and into the office.

At this time of year when we celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day, here's a look at how the process of raising children may influence your thoughts and actions as a manager:

Focusing on results

Juggling multiple professional and familial demands and wanting to "be there" for your kids creates a desire to guard time from slipping away.

"I need to be 'ruthlessly efficient' while in the office as I have less time to get my work done physically sitting in my office chair," says Amanda Ponzar, chief marketing officer for Community Health Charities. "I can no longer be the first in the office and the last to leave, nor can I spend my day chitty-chatting and making the rounds going from office to office to catch up and turning work into social hour."

Ponzar also notes parenthood has increased her awareness that all employees have lives outside of the office and has boosted her commitment to working with staff on flexible schedules.

"Getting the work done is what matters," Ponzar stresses. "Learning that it's about the results not the hours is important for all managers who are dealing not only with different employees but also an increasingly virtual workforce spread out across the country or the world."

Limiting micromanagement

In a similar vein, managers often find they have less time and energy to oversee their employees' every move. Furthermore, leaders may come to recognize the value of backing off.

"Kids help you learn to allow for mistakes," says Peter Dudley, an author and former manager at Wells Fargo. "You get used to letting your children try things on their own . . . and fail. Your job is to ensure a safe environment, provide opportunity to grow, and help your child recover from and learn from mistakes. If you're constantly doing everything for your children, they never learn to do for themselves. If you're micromanaging

your employees, you never let their creativity and imagination loose to improve the team.”

Communicating effectively

Though those encounters with headstrong 2-year-olds or temperamental teenagers might be aspects of parenthood you’d rather forget, some leaders consider them learning opportunities.

“It took me many years to figure out that speaking to my children in a normal voice and communicating my desires clearly was much more effective than screaming at them, scaring them, or shaming them,” says Adam Cole, co-director of the Grant Park Academy of the Arts. “While I did not always get their compliance, I got it more often, and each interaction after that was more likely to be a conversation than sullen silence.”

Cole has extended this approach to the workplace. “Trying to find the most reasonable way to ask someone to do what needs to be done, and letting them know clearly what is at stake and what could be lost as a result of inaction, makes them partners and not victims of the boss. It engages their sense of value and inspires initiative rather than resistance.”

Recognizing differences

Remaining fair and impartial benefits both managers and parents, but so does factoring individuality into the equation.

“Parenthood has made me more aware of everyone’s different personalities and learning styles,” says Perryn Olson, marketing director at My IT. “I have two young daughters that couldn’t be more different personality-wise. You can’t treat everyone on your team the same way; some need more instructions, others more check-ins, and some more discipline—just like parenting siblings.”

Maintaining composure

Finally, don’t underestimate the power of parenthood on your ability to tackle tough situations in the office.

As noted by Jennifer Folsom, chief of corporate development at Summit Consulting, “I can handle anything. I mean seriously, I’m the mom of three boys; there’s nothing you can say or do that will freak me out. Because of that, when senior leadership meetings get tense I can put my mom hat on and say, ‘OK, everyone, deep breath; it’s all going to be fine. Let’s break this problem down into small pieces.’”