

Voice of the family in Africa Conference on 23rd January 2014

Employment and conducive work environment: Ensuring Work family Balance

Initiatives in the work place to promote work family balance.

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Some critical questions to address:

1. What is work family Balance?
2. Why is it important?
3. What is best practice in regard to promoting balance?
4. The personal challenge when striving for work life balance.

1. What Is work family balance?

This is a term often used to indicate the situation where work does not crowd out the other necessary activities needed in our lives especially those activities related to the family. The term recognizes that we have a limited amount of time and competing demands for that time. It has also risen to prominence as we struggle with the demands of work environments that are characterized by competition, deadlines and cost cutting measures that lead to staff reductions to rein in costs and improve profits.

Work life balance recognizes that a human being has exactly 24 hours a day and these have to be shared by his work and the other demands outside the work. The other activities could involve spiritual nourishment, physical development (sports), social interactions, study and self development and community obligations. The concept of balance suggests that we need to allocate sometime to each of these pursuits associated with healthy living.

2. Why is it important?

It seems that in this day and age, the biggest guzzler of our time seems to be the work we do and it also seems that in this day and age, the biggest casualty is our families. Given the great demands from our work and the real possibility that family life will be put on a back burner if not entirely disseminated, then we need to engage and find ways of enhancing work family Balance.

It is important because the family is the first school that children begin their education. It is the basic unit through which values are transmitted to the blank slates that are the children's minds when they are very young. It is the one place where future generations are prepared to take on their

roles and future parents and leaders who will again nurture future parents and leaders and who will again nurture future parents and leaders and bring about the possibility of inter generational societal improvements as opposed to inter generational societal decay.

(The question is often asked in relation to our society....Are we better off today as a society than we were 30 years ago?) The jury is out on this question as evidence suggests that we have a large body of evidence suggesting societal decay in the form of increased social vices such as drunkenness, drug abuse, violence, murder, theft, corruption, mistrust, abortion, suicide etc etc etc. Is it possible that this decay is directly related to the collapse of the natural family and the lack of basic socialization within the family?

The fact remains that the Natural Family is made up of Mother, Father and Children and any disruption to this arrangement will have negative consequences on the family and society at large. In the absence of Kenyan statistics, allow me to quote some research findings from the US in relation to the disruption of the natural family by a myriad of forces that have resulted in absent fathers (Statistics from a Fatherless America)

Sexual activity. In a study of 700 adolescents, researchers found that "compared to families with two natural parents living in the home, adolescents from single-parent families have been found to engage in greater and earlier sexual activity."

Source: Carol W. Metzler, et al. "The Social Context for Risky Sexual Behavior Among Adolescents," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 17 (1994).

A myriad of maladies. Fatherless children are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, suicide, poor educational performance, teen pregnancy, and criminality.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, *Survey on Child Health*, Washington, DC, 1993.

Drinking problems. Teenagers living in single-parent households are more likely to abuse alcohol and at an earlier age compared to children reared in two-parent households

Source: Terry E. Duncan, Susan C. Duncan and Hyman Hops, "The Effects of Family Cohesiveness and Peer Encouragement on the Development of Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Cohort-Sequential Approach to the Analysis of Longitudinal Data," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 55 (1994).

Drug Use: "...the absence of the father in the home affects significantly the behavior of adolescents and results in the greater use of alcohol and marijuana."

Source: Deane Scott Berman, "Risk Factors Leading to Adolescent Substance Abuse," *Adolescence* 30 (1995)

Sexual abuse. A study of 156 victims of child sexual abuse found that the majority of the children came from disrupted or single-parent homes; only 31 percent of the children lived with both biological parents. Although stepfamilies make up only about 10 percent of all families, 27 percent of the abused children lived with either a stepfather or the mother's

boyfriend.

Source: Beverly Gomes-Schwartz, Jonathan Horowitz, and Albert P. Cardarelli, "Child Sexual Abuse Victims and Their Treatment," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Is it possible that Work family balance can minimize the occurrence of these negative societal trends. I suggest that indeed this is the case and hence we should strive for better balance and most important presence in the family.

3. Suggested Best Practice to Promote Balance

The law does provide some basic requirements for employers such as the three month maternity and the two week paternity leave. However from my experience this is not really sufficient and employers should focus on flexible options that could assist parents have time to fulfill their family obligations. The law focuses on time out at birth and adoption. However the family life needs attention on a daily basis.

Good practices initiated by employers I have come across include flexi hours e.g. Start early and leave early, work from home so long as outputs required are clear, half day or part time jobs especially for mothers or fathers who need to spend time at home, on site crèches at work so that mothers can bring their young children, provision of housing near the work place to reduce commuting time, provision of transport to work to reduce hassles of commuting home etc.

Apart from good practices initiated by employers, there is the good practices that need to be initiated by parents. These require a serious personal conviction that the family is really a very critical aspect of our lives and hence we need to be prepared to sacrifice even what at times seems very valuable in the eyes of society such as the possibility of promotion, possibility of very attractive remuneration and even the possibility of living the good life for the sake of the family.

(The fundamental question we need to ask ourselves is...what value do you place on your family when faced with an option to choose an alternative that will take you away from your family) Kshs 1 million, 5 million, 10 million??? When offered a job in a foreign country where you will see your family every six months. It is up to each and everyone of us to decide.

(The story of David – Lucrative Promotion to South Africa), (The Story of Richard -Lucrative Investment fund offer)

4. The Personal Challenge

Ultimately it will boil down to a personal challenge. It is my humble submission that we should not focus on best practices but we should focus more on better choices aimed at objectively allocating time to what is important and actively defending the capture of that time by work related interests.

This focus of necessity requires:

1. Continuous vigilance as disruptions creep in on you as a parent. It may start with the taking up of an extra project, the acceptance of an acting capacity role in addition to normal daily work, the acceptance of unreasonable deadlines and the convenience of communication channels that enable us to work all the time at home and even in the bedroom. (Mobile phones, internet, emails, whatsapp, linked in , face book etc) leave us totally exposed to the everybody else out side our homes at the risk of ignoring everybody within the home.
2. Top of Brain – My family comes first needs to be at the top of your brain everyday. This way you can avoid early breakfast meetings, late evening dinners, weekend work excursions etc.
3. Creativity: Combine work and family where possible. Wherever possible you could travel with your family for work related activities in hotels and lodges and even overseas if it is in the school holidays.
4. Spousal support and reinforcement especially in relation to sacrifices that may need to be made. Spouses need to focus on the family together and not just one spouse at a time. This way it will be easier to keep on track as two are better than one. Fathers especially need to be reminded as their professional and business success is an integral part of their lives and they need to make a special effort. The world applauds material success and this can at a great price to the family life.

Finally in closing, I would like to close with a short story:

There was a very wise old man who lived in a village and everybody knew he was very wise. A young boy decided to test the old man's wisdom. He got a little bird and approached the old man and asked him. Old man, I hear you are the wisest person in this village. I have a bird in my hand, tell me ...is the bird dead or alive.

The old man looked at the little boy and told him, the life of that bird is in your hands, I cannot tell you whether it is dead or alive.

In the same way, the life of our families is in our hands, only we can determine whether the family will live or die.

Thank you and God BLESS YOU.