Changing managers' defensive reasoning about work/family conflicts

Karen E. Watkins
The University of Georgia at Athens, GA, USA

Increasingly, organizations are responding to the pressure to create a "family-friendly" workplace. A workplace has been described as "family-friendly" when there are four or more policies or strategies which support employees with families. The two primary areas of employer involvement in work-family issues are:

(1) the provision of child care benefits in terms of on-site child care, vouchers, etc.

(2) the use of options which enhance workforce flexibility such as flexitime, voluntary shifts to part-time work, job sharing, work-at-home options, and flexible leaves[1].

This article examines some of the dynamics experienced by managers and supervisors when they attempt to enact the option of workforce flexibility.

Businesses have attempted to use alternative working arrangements such as flexitime and work-at-home options, child-care assistance and other new benefit options, and training to meet these changing demands. Yet, the primary emphasis of such programmes has been on creating alternate fringe benefit options, structural, policy, or logistical solutions. Almost no attempt has been made to provide an educational intervention aimed at helping managers and supervisors determine how to resolve some of the troubling dilemmas that arise when they must maintain a consistent level of production while accommodating workers' family needs. What has been done is training in workforce diversity. This training typically apprises managers of the changing demographics of the workforce and what they need to know to manage diversity as well as what will happen if they do not. Beginning first by describing the role of the supervisor in creating a supportive culture for family members, this article presents an actual case of a work/family conflict and a supervisor's response, the defensive patterns of response of others to the case, and suggests implications of this case approach for management development.

The role of the manager

Friedman and Galinsky[2], in a survey designed by the Families and Work Institute, found that one-quarter of the 1,706 mothers they surveyed experienced daily conflict between job and family. Further, a boss who is accommodating when conflicts arise between work and family life can

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significantly improve job satisfaction and the company's bottom line. Mothers who work for flexible bosses are seven times less likely to want to quit, and four times as likely to say they love their jobs. Supervisors in dual-income marriages are described as almost twice as likely to be very accommodating when job and family life collide. These bosses are more knowledgeable about formal company policies that might alleviate conflict. Working mums with supportive bosses are less irritable, have less stress, are less exhausted and feel less tension between job and family responsibilities. Seventy-one per cent of women who work for companies with four or more family-friendly policies love their jobs, compared with 43 per cent of respondents with employers who do nothing. About 13 per cent of the women working for companies with no family-friendly policies say they'd like to quit their jobs. None of the women in the companies that provided four or more such policies say they want to quit. Women who work in companies with four or more family-friendly policies are twice as likely to say they try to make up for any lost time by taking work home[2].

Women with higher incomes have more work/family conflicts, perhaps because of the likelihood that their work involves nights, weekends, travel and overtime. Women with lower incomes are most concerned about concentrating at work, perhaps because they are less able to afford high-quality child care, such as the mother represented in this case in Appendix 1, and are therefore concentrating on their child-care concerns rather than on their job tasks. In a study by *Fortune* magazine, one of the major findings was that problems with child care are the most significant predictors of absenteeism and unproductive time at work[3]. Clearly, how managers interpret and use family policies has a significant impact on women's long-term persistence in the workforce and their capacity to provide for their children's wellbeing. The way that they interpret policy is a function of their mental model or frame on the problem.

Changing mental models

Scholars are calling for management development aimed at surfacing and challenging the mental models of managers which now prevent the organization from changing to meet the demands of an increasingly complex world[4,5]. Mental models are the "images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world"[6]. Since these models are often tacit, below the level of conscious awareness, they are neither tested nor examined. Moreover, under conditions of threat or anxiety, defensive patterns emerge. Argyris[7] defines defensive reasoning as that which occurs when individuals:

> (1) hold premises the validity of which is questionable – yet they think it is not, (2) make inferences that do not necessarily follow from the premises – yet they think they do, and (3) reach conclusions that they believe they have tested carefully – yet they have not because the way they have been framed makes them untestable.

Examples of defensive routines are mixed messages, bypass and cover-up, speaking forthrightly, and easing in. Table I depicts these defensive routines.

Defensive routine	Definition	Illustration
Mixed messages	Deliberately saying two things at once which are inherently contradictory	In response to the question: "Is the training programme mandatory or voluntary?" Say: "I haven't lost my patience yet"
	Avoiding the issue	In response to the question: "When will I get my rise?" Say: "Let's get back to work"
Cover-up	Obfuscating the facts of a situation, particularly one's own responsibility	"She'll just have to document herself out of the door"
Speaking forthrightly	Speaking one's mind unequivocally and unilaterally, in a manner which makes discussion or disagreement difficult	"Family problems belong at home. You need to get your act together here"
Easing in	Using questions, small talk, or other conversation as a prelude to giving difficult information, often with the intent of getting the other individual to come up with the idea themselves	"So, how do you think you've been doing on this new project?"

Table I.
Defensive routines

An essential feature of a defensive routine is that it contains an inconsistency that is not discussable. Further discussion or enquiry is implicitly suppressed. More important, the pattern leads to hopelessness, cynicism, distancing, blame, and ultimately to mediocre performance among all involved parties, both those using defensive routines and those affected by others' defensive strategies. Well-intentioned and widely held defensive reasoning is particularly difficult to change.

Work/family conflicts and managers' reasoning: a management development programme

Balancing production and family needs of employees creates a dilemma for managers. Family-related leaves, now protected by federal legislation, are nevertheless often granted on the basis of the manager's discretion. Many companies have long had policies which grant unpaid personal leaves, but they

are awarded at the supervisor's discretion and are based on previous performance and the present needs of the work unit. As a result, managers must often negotiate on a one-to-one, interpersonal basis, whether or not an individual should be granted a family-related leave. This section describes the patterns or routines which emerged as individuals placed themselves in the difficult situation of interpersonally negotiating with an individual experiencing significant work/family conflict.

Data from an action science (see[8]) study of manager's reasoning around work-family leave issues illustrates the need for educational intervention when policy calls for supervisory discretion and employee negotiation. The Appendix details the original case which was written by a supervisor as part of a four-month long management development programme at a major high technology corporation. This is an actual case of a problem this supervisor was experiencing at that time. The case study provides a window into how female single parents' actions are perceived by the supervisor.

Examples for this article are drawn from the original case, a transcription of six managers discussing the case with the supervisor as part of the four-month management development programme, and a convenience sample of individuals in two different graduate programmes in human resource development as well as mid-managers in a large metropolitan community college system who responded to the case. Forty-four responses were collected to this "case prompt". The case prompt was the original case with the supervisor's thoughts and feelings deleted, and an open-ended section at the end calling for additional dialogue. Individuals gave four responses, three statements of what they would be thinking or feeling if they were the supervisor in the original case, and one statement of what they would say in the same situation. Argyris' theory of action science hypothesizes that most individuals will reason in a manner similar to that of the supervisor in the original case and that they will be unable to produce productive dialogue. Their reasoning, given in the first three responses, can be matched with the dialogue produced in the fourth statement. It is possible then to determine whether there is a match (what is said reflects what is thought) or a mismatch, and whether the dialogue is likely to be productive. Productive dialogue is defined as dialogue which combines advocacy with enquiry; in other words, which states one's position or needs clearly while enquiring into the other person's response. This fosters learning and interrupts defensive routines.

Defensive reasoning patterns

Analysis of the case illustrates the dilemmas faced by supervisors in a production- or profit-driven organizational setting. Defensive routines employed by respondents to the case prompt were analysed. Twelve responses consisted of a bypass of the situation, with eight of these 12 bypass responses in the form of passing the problem on to the employee, or another work unit or agency. Twenty responses were examples of being forthright. Half of the forthright responses were direct confrontations of the employee and another half were

either mixed messages, placing blame, or overt threats. The themes which emerged were the idea of a "bank of credit", the issue of responsibility; the defensive routines of bypassing and using threats; and finally of helplessness. The first pattern was the idea that the supervisor's or manager's willingness to accommodate is like a bank of credit – the more willing he or she is, the more "credit" one has at the "bank".

A bank of credit. Women have felt that there is a "bank of credit" on work/family conflicts after which there is no appeal; yet this line of credit is implicit. In this case, the manager tried three times to accommodate the worker. Yet, many other managers who read this case have argued that he was too accommodating, suggesting that the bank of credit is different, depending on who the manager is. This willingness to accommodate may vary by how the supervisor views the employees' skills or previous performance; by the personality of the supervisor; by his/her empathy with the employee, etc. But, when this line of credit is exhausted, there is no recourse for the employee.

Responses to the case prompt concur. Of 44 respondents, 26 changed from a desire to help to a belief that this individual should not be retained. But the point in the case where the respondent's attitude turned varied. Eleven were either out of patience or sceptical at the first interaction, seven changed at the second interaction, 19 gave up at the third, and only seven remained willing to accommodate at the end of the case. One respondent felt that his willingness to be accommodating should depend on previous performance; "A good employee is worth the time and trouble. Their work history should provide a guide as to their worth. A lesser employee should be moved into a position of less importance, and released if necessary".

While this article does not argue that accommodation is the "correct" response in this case, previous research suggests that accommodation is an inexpensive and effective strategy for easing work-family conflicts. Researchers found that women who work for the most accommodating companies are more satisfied with their jobs, take fewer sick days, are sick less; they often work more in their own time, work later into their pregnancies, and are more likely to return to work[9]. One assumption we might make, then, is that the longer a supervisor or manager is willing to work with the individual, the more likely the baby will mature and routines will settle in, and the individual should be able to respond with increased productivity. That a full quarter of the individuals in this study were negatively predisposed from the outset is sobering.

Defensive routines: bypass. The issue of who is responsible for solving this problem is also difficult. Uncertain of who is responsible for helping the employee with work/family conflicts, the supervisor in the original case felt personally responsible for coming up with a workable strategy. He sought help from the logical part of the organization for this type of problem, employee assistance. When each attempt at resolution failed, the supervisor began to blame the individual and hold her wholly responsible for solving the problem. Yet, in another sense, this pattern of reasoning prevented him from seeking

further information from the employee or involving the other three new mothers in brainstorming solutions. This is a bypass strategy because he bypasses dealing directly with both the work and the family issues. His approach is to provide solutions and to present them in a way that prevents dialogue.

Numerous individuals felt personally responsible, as this supervisor did, for identifying a workable solution, but the approach, as often, backfired. For example, supervisors who felt personally responsible for solving the employee's problems said, "I've tried to help her. What is she doing? I'm out of ideas. Maybe somebody else can help", or "This isn't working. I'm not meeting my goals. Why do I feel like I'm a social worker? If I send her to the EAP, it will make it easier for me to fire her". These responses bypass dealing with the problem, assume a unilateral solution, and pass the problem on to another area. Or others said: "I should have taken a harder stand in the situation earlier. Look at all the accommodations I have tried to make to help you out. Look at the thanks I get" and "I do all this to help, and this is what happens! I need a worker, I don't need a new mother". In the case, the supervisor effected a transition from feeling personally responsible to distancing himself from responsibility for the outcomes: "She will just have to document herself out of the door".

As the supervisor eventually did, most respondents felt that the employee was wholly responsible for solving the problem. Comments ranged from, "You need to work out these problems on your own and not use this as an excuse for low performance", to "I feel you need to assess priorities and consider whether to place your importance on being a mother or a professional". Finally, one individual wrote, "Excuses! Don't bring your personal problems into the workplace".

Williams and Alliger[10] are also not immune to this individualistic bias. After meticulously documenting the negative effect of work-family conflict on both work and family, they conclude that "individuals should structure their work and family roles to reduce the potential for role intrusions". Although they acknowledge a role for organizational interventions such as flexible schedules, their emphasis is on the need for individuals to solve this problem. Unfortunately, their research and that of others suggest that this problem is too large, too pervasive for individuals already taxed to the limit to handle without help.

Defensive routine – be forthright!

Being forthright is the preferred approach of individuals reading this case. This is a defensive routine because, while it states a position, the supervisor "defends against" any response or dialogue. Many managers are encouraged to handle performance problems in this manner. The inherent conflict between family-related policies and productivity-related policies (absenteeism, tardiness, etc.) was seldom acknowledged and was always resolved in favour of immediate productivity. Faced with this undiscussable conflict, respondents ranged from direct confrontation, to threats, to feelings of "sabotage". For example, some made an implied threat such as: "Take the two days and consider it an

opportunity to make a decision about your commitment to your job here. You need to return ready to start fresh or perhaps another job would be more suited to your current needs". Others avoided discussion of the performance problem: "Rather than vacation, I'm going to give you some time off for counselling at company expense. Before you go to counselling, you and I should schedule an hour to talk about your home responsibilities". Some responses appeared to avoid both work and family issues: "If we were to brainstorm ways to get you more money, how would you start the list?" One response intimated that a desire to help the employee felt like disloyalty to the company: "I would probably look for ways to help the employee and sabotage (maybe not that severe) the company".

More direct or forthright comments clarify the supervisors' position, but do not enquire into the response of the employee. For example,

> X, in this organization, raises are based on contribution and productivity. Over the past six weeks you have been consistently late for work and your productivity has been below standard. A raise is out of the question. I can understand that[you need money] but raises are not based on personal need. If you have some vacation days left, I would encourage you to try to locate another job that will meet your needs.

Defensive routine – easing in

Others stated the problem and asked the employee to consider how to solve it: "I'd like to work with you on this, but you're going to have to make a commitment to make it work. Can you give me some ideas of how we can improve your productivity since that is what is holding up your raise?" This approach eases in to the issue, accuses the employee of a lack of commitment, then lets slip the real agenda without mention of the personal situation which is confounding the productivity issue.

Helplessness

Some respondents to the case prompt were clear that personal problems had no place at work, yet this supervisor felt that it was more threatening to document her poor performance, even when she was going to the nurse once or twice per shift to take a half-hour nap. He said,

> I want to think I…give the people the benefit of a doubt instead of coming up and saying "you're not doing your job…" I want to understand what's draining them first of all…When you go in at an approach like that, "You're not doing your job", you automatically draw a line, and you put yourself on one side and him on the other. And then it's you against him…

Since he had rated her high on her last evaluation, a low rating on the current one (though justified) would be immediately traced to the major intervening variable in her life. How does the supervisor save face under these conditions? If he reported or documented her now after recently saying she was a very good employee, he's either insensitive or inconsistent. If he doesn't and the pattern continues, he has to wait even longer to document a pattern. In the end, he thinks, "My hands are tied".

Examples of the helplessness of those reading the case are: "I'm out of ideas. Maybe somebody else can help", and "This isn't working. Nothing seems to be. I'm still trying to figure out what can work for you, but I'm running out of patience", and finally, "I would have been extremely exasperated (since the other mothers are handling it well) and at 'the end of my rope'."

Options for resolving these conflicts were largely unknown. In this case, there are three other new mothers working on the same line. That they might be resources to the mother in trouble is never considered. Similarly, the supervisor never asks the woman directly either for more information about the nature of the problem or for her ideas on what might work. What he looks for are solutions in the context of the organization, alternate scheduling, employee assistance, and finally the threat of lower compensation and potential dismissal. What was threatening to the supervisor was the way in which this conversation would place him in an adversarial position, yet he concluded that he would have to draw that line anyway. Helping managers analyse the case and to challenge both the approach of the supervisor and their own responses enables them to move beyond helplessness to think differently about the issues and to generate alternatives.

Productive responses

The case illustrates the need for training which allows managers to discuss these dilemmas and to invent new solutions creatively unhampered by current workplace norms and policies. Learning which helps individuals transform both their perceptions about such situations and their notions of what workplace norms might be is needed. Action science posits that a more productive dialogue ensues when individuals combine advocacy with genuine enquiry. Two respondents to the case prompt used this approach: "I feel uncomfortable giving you a raise with your productivity down. (How was it before the baby?) I understand how hard it can be to adjust to a new baby. What can we do so that we meet your needs and we have an effective employee?" and "I understand that you need the money, but I'm afraid that getting a second job might affect your performance here. Why don't we work together on a plan to increase your productivity; if your performance improves, we can still talk about a raise". In these instances, there are clear positions taken and parameters given, but the employee is invited into the problem-solving process.

What was noteworthy about the original case is the singular lack of enquiry. Was the baby colicky or sick? Had the employee any physical after-effects from giving birth which could influence her exhaustion? Was she getting any help? What options had she tried? Why did she need a rise? What was her performance like before the baby? Many respondents to the case raised these and more questions. In the original case, the supervisor had given this employee high ratings in the past, and had promised her a rise which was now due. Amazingly, even with this information about why the employee was upset, his peers in the same company said the following:

> Well, a lot of it is because she's expecting a raise that was due…to her that she never got. And that's what we told her, "You'll get it, but you have to wait three to six months. It's coming". Which fact wasn't true at all; we shouldn't have told her.
>
> But to some degree it seems like she's still just putting her problems back on…you or the company…And a lot of people will do that when you confront them about their performance or problems you're having with them.

In the workshop sessions, managers could examine their own defensive responses to dealing with this difficult issue and safely discuss the problem of maintaining high levels of production while supporting and accommodating the family needs of their employees. Managers shared related cases such as the manager who had an employee who gave birth to a baby with a bad heart. The baby had to have open heart surgery shortly after the employee returned from maternity leave. An emergency leave was granted so that the employee could be with the baby in the hospital and during recovery. The surgery was not successful. A second surgery was needed. Employees all over the plant donated sick leave days to the employee so that she could again stay with the baby during surgery. But it was again unsuccessful. A third surgery was scheduled. When the employee came to ask for leave again, the manager was told to let her go. Many years later, the incident troubled him. These and other examples suggest the great need for educational sessions aimed at helping managers identify additional options for handling these incidents which have such serious consequences for families, work, and the managers themselves.

Conclusion

Few would argue that single parents, a group which has doubled in size since 1970, are some of the most stressed workers. The second highest stressed worker is the dual career parent. Greenhaus[11] argues that work/family conflict can best be understood theoretically as a form of stress response to role overload and overlapping or incompatible non-work and work demands. Many employees are now severely stressed and overloaded. Organizational and family solutions alike are needed.

Management development programmes aimed at educating supervisors and managers about the impact of their attitudes, providing strategies for easing stringent productivity norms during critical times, and offering more flexible working options and suggesting the need to have dialogue aimed at reaching mutually acceptable, jointly developed solutions, can lead to more creative and effective solutions. Enabling managers to see the way in which their reasoning about these conflicts creates barriers to solving them is one way in which learning may transform individuals and organizations. The biggest obstacle to increased provision of work/family initiatives is the assumption that these concerns fall out of the realm of the workplace[12]. Fernandez[13] summarizes the situation in his report for AT&T: "As this country progresses toward the 1990s, it is inevitable that the number of working women, dual-career families, and single heads of households will increase dramatically…This situation will heighten the tension caused by the conflict between work and family life, and

ultimately this stress – if it is not dealt with by corporations, government, and parents themselves – will have a negative impact on this nation's capacity to be a productive and competitive society in the new world economy."

That few individuals reading this case saw much hope for this new mother should surprise no one. By making this frame problematic, however, I have been able to get groups and individuals to generate more creative responses, to work on the problem without ignoring or being overwhelmed by the constraints of production, policy and responsibility. What is significant for management development is that very few (only two) were able to do this without intervention. By making the dilemmas in the case discussable, the tradeoffs being made between production and accommodation could be acknowledged and options could be generated based on a more realistic appraisal of what was feasible in the situation. Other questions could also be discussed such as whether supervisors' jobs would really be on the line if they made accommodations for people with work/family conflicts.

The dilemma of this supportive supervisor – four single parents on an eight-person line, all of whom recently gave birth – is particularly challenging and even overwhelming. This, I found, makes it an excellent case for discussion. Because people have to go considerably beyond the obvious knee-jerk responses (since the supervisor had already tried these) to solve the problem, they are forced either to give up or to think of strategies which are outside their customary frame. In either case, the ensuing discussion moves people to a much deeper level of understanding about both the need for policies at a higher level in the organization and the nation; and to more practical options at the local level. As one respondent thought, "There must be some way to help her get better here and not aggravate the problem by taking another job. Think. Flexitime. Shared time. Change policy. Why didn't Employee Assistance help? Ask her". How simple and yet how difficult it seemed. When all else fails, ask her. For problems so complex, this will not be all that is needed, but getting these conversations out in the open is at least a beginning.

The relationship of the employee with the supervisor is one of the most powerful predictors of work/family problems. Work/family support occurs when:

- supervisors feel that handling family issues, especially as they affect job performance, is a legitimate part of their role;
- supervisors are knowledgeable about company policies that apply to family issues;
- supervisors are flexible when work/family problems arise;
- supervisors handle employees' work/family problems fairly and without favouritism.

Having a perceived unaccommodating culture was predictive of stress-related health problems, parents worrying about their children while at work, and the perception that child care problems impair productivity[2].

The implications for management development of this process are these. Managers felt helpless when they lacked strategies for providing support. Management development programmes aimed at clarifying what options are open to managers in an organization are essential. Yet this was not enough. Programmes in which managers learn to produce productive conversations characterized by setting limits and jointly developing solutions with the employee are needed. What is most significant is that training cannot simply give managers a policy without examining how one policy conflicts with another, what practical binds managers are in when they implement the policy, or discussing the meaning and implications of "supervisor's discretion" in work/family policies. The use of cases such as this one is an effective way to examine these nuances and to surface the managers' concerns in implementing ambiguous or conflicting policies. The management development process is most effective when focused on first getting managers to state what they would think and do in a given situation, making typical responses problematic, and then pushing managers to generate more creative alternatives. Such management development programmes play an important role in enabling managers and supervisors to handle the complex and challenging task of helping employees balance work and family demands.

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Appendix: Four pregnant women

The following scenario took place in a *Fortune 100* company which produces high technology equipment. Four of the eight persons on a line were pregnant and delivered their babies within a few months of one another. At the time this particular worker's baby was due, she was also due for a rise by policy specifications. Since the arrival of the baby, her production rate is down, as is her attendance; however, she did do what was required to earn it before taking her maternity leave.

Thoughts and feelings	*Dialogue*
(A person coming back from a pregnancy has poor productivity and attendance.)	
● She looks dead tired; she's doing minimal work ● Yeah, I'd be tired too. ● She'd get more sleep if she worked on days.	Supervisor: It looks like you've run out of energy since you returned. What is the problem? She: The baby keeps me up all day; I can't get any sleep. Supervisor: Would another shift be more accommodating She: I'll try it on the condition that if it doesn't work, I can come back to 4th shift.
(She came back to 4th after 2 months: she still had attendance problems.)	
● I've already had 4 pregnant women on an 8-person line with attendance problems and exhaustion. Why are we back? Did we solve any problems? Nothing has been solved. Her productivity is lower than the rest of the group; I'm putting her on a less demanding job.	Supervisor: What happened on first shift? She: I had transportation problems. Supervisor: You're still looking rather tired. I'm going to move you to a different piece of equipment, Let's see if Employee Assistance can help you with some of your domestic problems.
(A lot of single mothers' productivity has fallen. They are only performing minimally and are here to collect benefits. Two weeks later, she still has poor productivity.)	
● She has to be told the facts. ● Great? Now she's really going to be exhausted at work. ● We've tried to help in every way we can. Now I have to let her document herself out of the door. I feel like my hands are tied.	She: When am I going to get a raise? Supervisor: You're not if your productivity doesn't improve. She: I need two days' vacation to find a second job. Supervisor: That won't help your situation here at all. She: Yes, but I need the money.