Family Supportive Supervision: A Powerful Tool to Recruit & Retain

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the U.S. economy is in a strong place since the 2008 recession; in fact, the unemployment rate hit a 49-year record low of 3.6% in April of 2019 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This makes it difficult for employers to find strong candidates and retain stellar employees, particularly in blue-collar industries such as manufacturing, food services, agribusiness, construction, and healthcare clinics and nursing homes. The demand for blue-collar workers in particular is expanding because of factors such as the return of manufacturing jobs to the U.S., the rapid expansion of transportation, service, and health-support industries, and the slowed pace of technological worker replacement (Levanon & Steemers, 2018). At the same time, the U.S. is experiencing a tight supply of available blue-collar workers as the Baby Boomers retire en masse, young Americans increasingly pursue two- and four-year degrees, and disability rates rise as a result of the opioid epidemic (Krueger, 2017). According to data from the employment cost index, employers have been trying to entice candidates and employees via wages. Wage growth in blue-collar and low-pay sectors have accelerated considerably relative to white-collar occupations (Levanon & Steemers, 2018). However, not only is this failing to correct the worker shortage, but it is not sustainable in an economic downturn. Another option to consider that is research-supported, lasting, and a cost-effective means of attracting candidates and retaining top talent in these vulnerable blue-collar industries lies in bolstering family-supportive supervision.

Key Concerns & Policy Conclusions

➢ *Blue-collar industries are in a unique position in American history, where the demand for workers far exceeds the supply (Campbell, 2019). Improving wages is important, but a more lasting, and research-driven solution is to implement family supportive supervision.*

➢ *Family supportive supervision (FSS) occurs when supervisors exhibit behaviors that are supportive of their employees having lives beyond work, and consists of emotional support, instrumental support, role-modeling behaviors, and creative work-family management.*

➢ *FSS is associated with beneficial outcomes in employees such as reduced work-family conflict and turnover intentions and improved physical health and job satisfaction.*

➢ *Key recommendations for implementing FSS include:*

- *Interventions similar to those referenced here*

- *Encouragement of a family-supportive culture by top management*

What is Family Supportive Supervision (FSS)?

Family supportive supervision occurs when supervisors exhibit behaviors in recognition of the fact that their employees are not only workers, but also caretakers and spouses with home responsibilities to consider (Hammer, Kossek, Zimmerman, & Daniels, 2007). The four types of family supportive supervision include:

Emotional Support (e.g. supervisor listening and demonstrating concern when an employee has a sick child)

Instrumental support (e.g. supervisor finds someone to cover a shift for an employee with a sick child)

Role-modeling behaviors (e.g. supervisor doesn't work after closing time to demonstrate that the behavior is acceptable for employees)

Creative work-family management (e.g. supervisor creates a new scheduling system that better accommodates family concerns)

One question that arises is whether organization-wide policies might be more effective than FSS at helping workers manage both their work and family lives. As of late, organizations are becoming more likely to adopt family-friendly policies, such as the opportunity for flexibility in where or when an employee works, as well as maternal/paternal leave. These policies benefit the bottom line through a variety of means, including reduced turnover and absenteeism, positive press/reputation, and tax breaks (Demby, 2004). However, how and for whom these organizational policies are enacted is often dictated by the individual supervisor (Breaugh & Frye, 2008). For instance, an employee may be hesitant to ask about paternal leave if they're considering their future performance evaluations and know their supervisor doesn't approve of using these benefits. In addition, some family-friendly workplace policies wouldn't even apply to blue-collar industries because of the way those jobs are structured (e.g., you can't work from home as a construction worker). Thus, the supervisor is the key piece of the puzzle, whether it be in their role of encouraging use of family-friendly policies or in taking matters into their own hands and leading in a way that benefits their employees as more than workers.

Why should you care about FSS, and what are the implications of instituting it?

Helping employees manage their home lives is increasingly critical because American families nowadays rarely resemble the "traditional" structure, where the female stayed at home and handled home responsibilities. Among married heterosexual parents with children under 18, approximately 66% are dual-earner couples, and approximately 24% of US mothers of children under 18 report being a single mother (Geiger, Livingston, & Bialik, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Furthermore, according to a recent report by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), an estimated 43.5 million adults in the United States have provided unpaid care to an adult or a child in the prior 12 months (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP Public Policy Institute, 2015). All of these statistics help explain why work-family conflict (WFC) is a prevailing issue for many working adults. WFC occurs when the demands of the work and family roles are incompatible and participation in one domain makes participation in the other more difficult.

The two types of work-family conflict (work interfering with family, and family interfering with work) are associated with a number of problematic psychological, physical, and performance-related outcomes, such as burnout/exhaustion, work-related and family-related stress, health problems, and work performance (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). This is one problem that family-supportive supervision can help resolve; across multiple studies, it has been consistently found that family-supportive supervision is associated with lesser perceptions of work interfering with family (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011).

One potential counterpoint to note is that studies in lower-income and blue-collar samples (e.g. Grzywacz et al., 2007) find fewer reports of WFC relative to averages in white-collar samples. This is surprising, given that many blue-collar occupations pay relatively small wages; this, in turn, makes it difficult to "hire out" certain family responsibilities, like child or elder care. Thus, this might introduce the question of whether it is worthwhile to focus FSS efforts in blue-collar industries, if they truly aren't experiencing much WFC. However, when you take a look at some of the specifics of these findings, there are some nuances demonstrating there is more going on than meets the eye, and that WFC is still an issue for blue-collar individuals. For instance, one study of WFC in blue-collar workers used only Latino immigrants, so it may be that cultural differences account for why little WFC was reported, rather than that they were blue collar workers (Grzywacz et al., 2007). Another study noted that while blue-collar workers reported less WFC, the WFC was strongly associated with poor health outcomes (Hämmig, 2014). Further-more, a FSS intervention within the service industry has been success-ful in reducing perceptions of work interfering with family (Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, & Zimmerman, 2011). These exam-ples highlight that these aforementioned nuances matter, and that improving upon FSS still has positive impacts on WFC in blue-collar organizations.

Another benefit of introducing family-supportive supervision is its association with many other organizational- and employee-relevant outcomes. For instance, higher levels of FSS is associated with greater job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions. Furthermore, higher levels of FSS is related to family-to-work and work- to-family spillover, which entails experiences in one in one role improving the quality of life in the other (Hammer et al., 2009). Therefore, not only is FSS responsible

What are the Outcomes of FSS? A Brief Summary

Greater….

- Work-family facilitation
- Total sleep time
- Job satisfaction
- Parent-child shared time
- Self-reported physical health

Reduced…

- Work interfering with family
- Self-reported sleep insufficiency
- Turnover Intentions

for reducing WFC, it also appears to facilitate positive interactions between the two domains! It's important to note that the family-friendly support is especially vital; this same study found that FSS was important in predicting turnover intentions and job satisfaction above and beyond the role that general supervisor support plays.

What can organizations do to improve FSS?

Organizations have a number of options as to how they can improve the family-friendly behaviors of their supervisors, all of which have the potential to benefit employees, the organization, and the bottom line. We provide a few brief suggestions, all of which are time- and cost-effective, and are expected to be met with little to no hostility across all levels in the organization. These recommendations are listed below (in no particular order), and then are elaborated on in the following section:

- Institute a brief FSS intervention and evaluate changes pre-to-post in employee outcomes.
- Have top management emphasize family-supportive focus and practices in the culture
- Periodically assess FSS behav-iors, both from the perspective of managers and employees

Institute an FSS Intervention: There is a great deal of support for launching family-supportive supervision interventions, and a prominent and successful intervention in a blue-collar industry is highlighted in the sidebar on the right. This study (Hammer et al., 2011) introduced a brief training intervention solely focused on FSS for supervisors. Other interventions included a similar FSS component, and also incorporated elements related to a greater focus on results rather than face-time at work (Crain et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2015). All of these interventions were quite effective, in that employees experienced the hypothesized outcomes of greater parent-child shared time (Davis et al., 2015), greater total sleep time and reduced self-

reported sleep insufficiency (Crain et al., 2019), as well as greater physical health (Hammer et al., 2011). While the specific FSS trainings in these studies incorporated assessment products from Northwest Education Training and Assessment, LLC, we recommend that organizations work in conjunction with an industrial-organizational psychology team to implement research-informed changes.

Top-Management Family Support: Results summed across multiple studies suggest that family-supportive supervision is directly associated with lower perceptions of work interfering with family; however, what partially binds FSS with work interfering with family is family-supportive organizational perceptions (Kossek et al., 2011). This means that FSS may contribute to broader perceptions by employees that organizations are family-supportive, which in turn contributes to reduced impressions of work interfering with family. By the same token, it may be the case that family-supportive organizational cultures (as driven by top management) would encourage supervisors to act in a manner that helps employees manage personal responsibilities. In fact, other studies have noted that one of the three ways by which executive-level leaders influence the family-supportive culture of their organization is through the enactment of front-line managerial support for family needs (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). Thus, one recommendation to organizations to improve their FSS would be to have top management take definitive action - both through their words and direct initiatives - that makes the importance of leading in a family-supportive way clear to supervisors.

Periodically Assess FSS Behaviors: Combined with other means of implementing an improvement in FSS, we also recommend assessing FSS behaviors, as reported by the supervisors themselves and their subordinates. Using periodic assessments is a good way for organizations to get a baseline of where they are currently at, examine progress over time, and highlight target departments or areas where FSS is particularly low. Fortunately, researchers have already developed a validated assessment of FSS behaviors, targeting each of the four dimensions noted earlier (Hammer et al., 2009). We recommend use of this assessment in organizations, along with a data analysis team to interpret the results.

A Family-Supportive Supervision Intervention in 12 Grocery Stores in the Midwest: A Spotlight (Hammer et al., 2011)

➤ A research team conducted an FSS intervention in 6 grocery stores, with the other 6 serving as "controls" (no training comparison group).

➤ Intervention consisted of 1 hour of computer-based training and an hour face-to-face training regarding how and why to be a family-supportive supervisor, as well as am optional behavioral self-monitoring component over 3-5 weeks post-training (supervisors chose 6 behaviors and associated goals to monitor).

➤ Training led to a significant improvement in physical health of the employees with trained supervisors, relative to the control group.

➤ For employees with high levels of family-interfering-with-work before the study started, they experienced significantly greater gains in job satisfaction and physical health and decrease in turnover intentions relative to similar employees in the stores without training.

➤ Conclusion: A brief family-supportive supervisor training can make an impact on employees, especially those with high levels of conflict already present.

Conclusion

"Exceptional [leaders] prioritize the well-being of their people and, in return, their people give everything they've got to protect and advance the well-being of one another and the organization."

- Simon Sinek

We've demonstrated the strong research backing behind family-supportive supervision, but even before taking that into consideration, its value is logically apparent: treat your employees well and help them with their family concerns, and they will repay you and your organization in spades. While we support family-supportive supervision in all contexts, blue-collar workers are the focus here because they are especially unable to use many common family-friendly benefits (e.g., flexplace) in the structure of their roles, and because they experience all of the detriments of work-family conflict. Furthermore, given the current high demand and low supply of workers, blue-collar employers need a competitive edge in hiring and retaining; unlike other techniques, FSS will have long-term benefits for both the organization and employee. Thus, we advise that leaders in these industries pay special attention to the recommendations in this brief and institute them in their own organizations.

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