Why Women Can’t Have It All

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Only a concerted thoughtful effort to change work environments will enable companies and public sector organizations to realize the full power of employing women in top jobs. That is the essential message in the provocative essay “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All ” by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a distinguished public servant and academic who has written a long lament in the Atlantic about why the work environment for women and men must change and how increased productivity could be the long-term result.

Long admired as a model modern woman with a staggering list of accomplishments and an active family life, Slaughter confesses that her experiences prove much more must be done about the mindset of the workplace.

Slaughter contends it is time we all acknowledge that being “super woman” and working in the same way that classically has been associated with men does not meet the needs of women who are as committed to parenting actively while they pursue their career aspirations.

At most large organizations, the culture and workplace environment are not designed to help women reach the highest executive ranks. In both private and public sector jobs, building the executive ranks by accommodating women who want to raise families is rarely a priority.

That needs to change for today’s women who are increasingly vocal about finding true balance between family and professional duties and desires.

This call for a balanced approach follows the generation of women who spearheaded the feminist movement and were willing to sacrifice personal and family lives to forge equality with men in the work force and in high level leadership roles.

Today’s executive woman seeks to achieve her career aspirations, reach the pinnacles of leadership across the range of professions and concurrently have more high quality time with her children and spouse.

To make this possible for a growing number of women, as well as men who are more vocal about this need, Slaughter suggests making critical changes in private and public sector work environments.

First, work environments need to continue evolving. Meetings should be held during “school hours” rather than at times of day when parents and children would benefit most from being together – in the mornings and after school for dinner and evenings.

Second, working from variable locations, is now practical given technological tools including video-conferencing, teleconferencing, email etc. and other tools that make connectivity from remote locations
routine. Organizations now readily utilize organizational connectivity when people are not physically in the office together. However, many companies have not conscientiously enabled female employees to make their work portable. Once critical relationships are established and people have a good routine for staying connected, remote working should not just be an option but a norm.

Third, organizations should recognize that women have longer life expectancies and therefore should have longer career trajectories that should free them from being locked into employment timetables designed for men. Slaughter recommends that women should, when possible, have children by age 35, so they can accommodate the duties of motherhood while allowing their careers to plateau or move laterally across roles for a while. As long as organizations recognize – and plan for – these career path variations, women will be able to rebuild momentum at work as their children finish high school and move on to college. This staggered plan for progress is, of course predicated on work environments that are “friendly” to women taking time for family and raising children. Unfortunately most organizational cultures still measure success by rapid upward progression through the ranks on a straight line timetable.

Clearly these are all viable recommendations and some of these “family friendly” policies are indeed being enacted in corporations today, although by Slaughter’s account, less so in the public sector. Nevertheless we have a long way to go.

Just as women became passionate about feminism, with a strong and unified voice, so too, do women and men, need to become impassioned about what I will call “familyism” – the need to build new career trajectories which allow growth over a longer time horizon while providing women and men opportunity to engage more actively in building and raising their families.

Research shows that corporations with family-friendly and flexible working standards are stronger long-term performers. Enablers, such as technology, support these new and more flexible ways of working. Life expectancies allow for longer career trajectories, but the unspoken culture of work that exists in the majority of organizational settings, does not. It is up to all of us to speak up, take risks, set policies and change our attitudes and approaches to work and career advancement to make this happen.

At Meritas Partners, we are committed to empowering men and women to achieve the personal leadership aspirations in a way that meets their professional and personal goals. We believe that this is the only way to realize your full potential.

Let us know your thoughts on this blog.

☐ Do you agree with Slaughter? If so, are women and men in your organization speaking up more for a flexible work style that supports this?

☐ What is being done in your organization and what more could be done?

☐ How can management better make the case that organizations can benefit by extending- rather than compressing – the cycle for highlighting c-suite talent?
How can organizations profit more by refining the selection, training, nurturing and utilization of female candidates in ways that include accommodating changing life style needs that include vibrant family dynamics?

We want to keep this conversation alive. Please join the party with your ideas.

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