For a good work-life balance, start with management

There are things you can’t just leave at home: How managers handle family conflicts influences how they lead.

May 15, 2026

Leaders are always told to model good behavior, and when it comes to harmonizing work and home life, that’s clearly good advice. How managers handle their own family demands

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influences how their teams perceive and use the resources available to achieve work-life balance.

This is corroborated by a study by IESE professor Mireia Las Heras, which identifies two types of effects: managers' family lives can lead them to facilitate work-life balance for their employees or, conversely, to hinder it.

Family problems, and two kinds of leader responses

When leaders face difficulties at home, such as child or elder care, their behavior at work typically shows one of two responses.

One possibility is that their emotional resources are depleted, leading them to become less willing to support their employees in their moments of difficulty and compromise. If this happens, they are likely to stop facilitating work-life balance.

Alternatively, the opposite may happen: By experiencing the effects of a lack of work-life balance themselves, they may become more empathetic toward those in a similar situation, and increase their support of employees.

The difference, according to Las Heras, is in how managers *perceive* the difficulty, which defines how they manage it.

A challenge or a roadblock? How responses to family crises determine leadership styles

When family issues flare up, some managers view them as challenges to overcome. They reorganize their schedules, adjust priorities and manage their time more efficiently. This response not only improves their own work-life balance, but it also strengthens their support for their employees'.

Managers in this scenario develop positive emotional states that expand their cognitive flexibility, allowing them to respond better to pressure.

However, when managers see their own family problems as *obstacles*, rather than as manageable or surmountable challenges, their emotional resources are depleted. This

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reduces their attention spans, limits their support for employees, and makes it harder for their teams to achieve work-life balance.

How can companies influence how their leaders interpret their problems?

A key aspect to healthy work-life balance in organizations is to be found in how leaders interpret life's challenges when they come, and in their ability to manage them well.

In this regard, organizations can help leaders adapt by encouraging them to view personal issues in a different light. Some pointers include:

- Creating workplace environments that encourage reflection to help reinforce leadership behaviors that better support work-life balance.
- Enabling managers to adjust their schedules, goals and workloads.
- Organizing coaching sessions, making work arrangements more flexible, and offering other resources and tools to support them.
- Providing programs on how to identify stress triggers and tackle challenges with the right mindset. These programs are particularly effective when conducted under the supervision of colleagues who can provide constructive feedback.

Managers' behaviors trickle down to the entire company. Therefore, when leaders are able to manage their family issues effectively, they are more likely to support their teams in turn.

When it comes to creating an organization committed to healthy boundaries and a happy workforce, we need to start at the top.

Mireia Las Heras

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