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guilt tripping – overcoming the obstacle of mother's guilt

Albert Einstein said that “life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving”. While I’m not going to argue with Einstein’s theory on physics, I do wonder whether he ever considered the equation for keeping that bike moving steadily down the bumpy road of life with children under one arm and a briefcase under the other.

Unfortunately for working mothers, the ride they are facing can feel like an uphill slog, with no rest stops in sight, and no winner’s podium with champagne at the end of the day. Many mothers are struggling with balancing the conflicting priorities of raising children and the pressures of fulltime employment. Not having the time and energy to fully commit to either task can lead to feelings of guilt and a lack of confidence in their ability to be both a dedicated mother and a focused employee.

I know firsthand the importance of having the right tools to deal with these demands before they become destructive for the individual, their family, their relationship and their performance at work. So, armed with an education in psychology and a background in professional coaching, I recently conducted a trial in order to gain an even greater understanding of the issues facing today’s working mothers. The study consisted of an initial survey, community workshops and a further post workshop study. Results from the research demonstrated that giving women the tools they need to increase harmony, focus and balance in their lives will have a positive impact on the workplace and staff retention.

From the first survey, responses were compiled and analysed from over 200 women relating to their life as a working mother and how guilt and stress was affecting their family, their workplace and themselves. These findings showed that 71 percent of women experienced moderate to extreme levels of guilt, one in three working mothers said that this guilt negatively affects their enjoyment of work and 90 percent said they felt like a bad mother. For many, relaxation time was a



low priority. Many noted they used negative coping mechanisms leading to poor lifestyle choices such as drugs, alcohol, coffee, smoking, binge eating or overeating. This obviously leads to further issues such as lack of sleep, poor physical health, depression, social withdrawal and weight issues – with 50 percent saying that lack of time has forced them into an unhealthy lifestyle, all of which contributes to increased absenteeism from the workplace.

As a manager or employer, being aware of these issues and implementing some simple tools in your workplace is the first step to ensuring your company is getting the best from your multi-tasking mothers. Creating a supportive culture encourages employees to enjoy both their life and their career without these feelings of guilt, depression, anger and resentment.

It is important to acknowledge the personal situations of your staff and set realistic expectations in regards to workloads and work hours. It goes without saying that time management is key to reducing feelings of stress and pressure. By creating daily and weekly visual task lists and using the DDDS technique (delete unimportant tasks, delegate, delay less important tasks and streamline by clustering jobs) employees can easily prioritise and make better use of their time. Regaining control, setting boundaries at work and at home and making conscious decisions about the job at hand will help your staff to re-focus and balance their tasks.

Encourage employees to set SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely – in both career and home life, and be sure to acknowledge achievement and recognise success. More importantly, encourage them to acknowledge themselves. When they realise the contribution they make and feel successful in their role, they can more clearly see the benefits of working – for both themselves and their family – which helps reduce feelings of guilt about being away from the home.

Offering coaching based stress management workshops or wellness programmes are a good step to encourage employees to discuss and address issues they may be dealing with in particular those which are affecting their

{ Inspire women to take time out and put themselves first }

performance at work. Wellness coaching will inspire women to take time out and put themselves first. They have the opportunity to look closely at their emotional, physical and mental well-being and address their own needs and desires without feeling guilty. Changing the way they think and feel about themselves brings peace not only to themselves but to their interactions with family and colleagues.

Coaching also gives people the opportunity to take stock of their personality, their values and their goals which establishes the starting point for change by determining what is missing, what changes can be made and how actions can be realigned with their goals to get them from where they are, to where they want to be. With an increased self-awareness about who they are and how they operate, they can focus on setting and achieving personal/career/health goals, learn how to better manage stress and also to reframe their thinking to begin the shift away from guilt.

The benefits of investing in your staff can be seen when we look at the results from the survey taken after women had been offered coaching in dealing with stress and guilt management. The research showed that feelings of stress had dropped by 30 percent and guilt had dropped by over 47 percent. Participants said it changed their attitude towards work, they enjoyed working and guilt about having a career was lessened as they felt more confident in their relationship with their children through better management of their time. This positive attitude and balanced outlook impacted on relationships with colleagues. Efficiency levels improved when women learned the skills required to avoid the distraction of external problems and focus their attention on work issues.

Take for example one participant of the study who was a leader of a team of employees. Her personality traits meant she was more inclined to be task oriented and often came across as sharp, impatient and lacking empathy. Pressure of

fulfilling her role in the company and desire for success was taking a toll on her home life. By looking closely at her personality strengths and weaknesses she realised changes could be made in the way she did things and the way she worked with others. By managing the stressors in her own life, she in turn became more empathetic to others and staff performance improved as morale and confidence grew. She inspired and worked with her team to achieve outcomes, rather than tackling tasks on her own. Feeling successful and a sense of achievement in her career helped justify her time away from her family and lessened her feeling of guilt, and without the added pressures of work issues, her time at home was focused on her children and her relationship.

You only have to look around your own workplace to see there are many successful women who are choosing to maintain both a family and a career after having children. The discussion is no longer about whether their choice is right or wrong – but ensuring that women and their employers are accepting of the implications their choice has, and successfully adapting their thoughts, actions and attitudes accordingly to create a supportive company culture. As a manager or leader you can help ensure that being a working mother doesn't feel like a gruelling guilt trip for your staff. With the help of some directions they can switch the gears down a notch, peddle with focus, and take some time out along the way to enjoy the scenery. ■



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