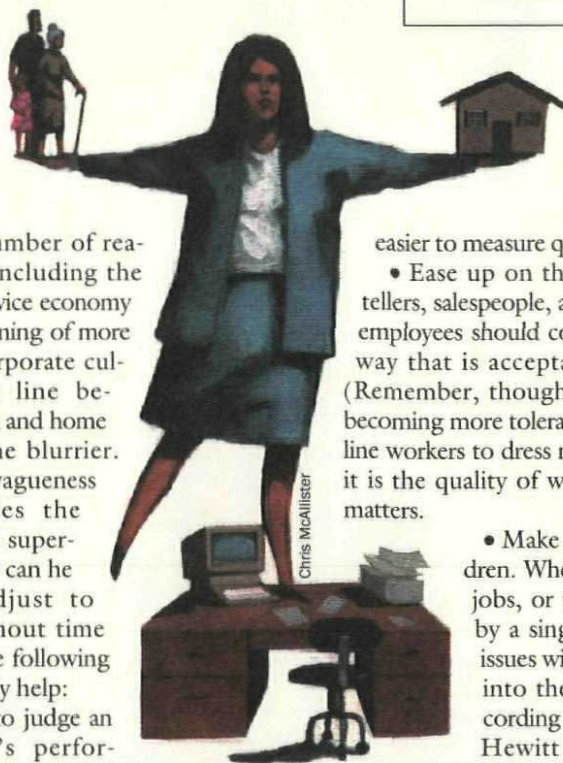


Executive **EDGE**



HOMEMAKING AT THE OFFICE

For a number of reasons—including the rise of a service economy and the coming of more relaxed corporate cultures—the line between work and home has become blurrier. This new vagueness complicates the duties of a supervisor. How can he or she adjust to world without time clocks? The following five tips may help:

- Learn to judge an employee's performance in terms of quality, not by the time it takes to get the work done. This is especially true of work in information industries, where it is usually

easier to measure quality than quantity.

- Ease up on the dress code. Bank tellers, salespeople, and other "frontline" employees should continue to dress in a way that is acceptable to the public. (Remember, though, that the public is becoming more tolerant.) Allow nonfrontline workers to dress more casually. Again, it is the quality of work performed that matters.

- Make allowances for children. When both parents hold jobs, or the family is headed by a single parent, childcare issues will inevitably spill over into the office. Today, according to a 1993 survey by Hewitt Associates of Lincolnshire, IL, nearly 75 percent of very large companies allow their employees to set aside day-care expenses as nontaxable income. Some companies even

provide child-care services themselves.

- Offer other family help, too. Baby-boom workers increasingly find themselves responsible for an aging parent, and this number is bound to grow. The Hewitt survey also showed that one in five very large companies now offers its employees some kind of eldercare benefits.

- Provide options and information. Many firms now give employees access to refrigerators and microwave ovens, helping them to cut food costs and maintain good nutrition. Some companies sponsor sports teams and events, encouraging workers to exercise. And some firms even send employees to seminars that show them how to plan for retirement. This may sound altruistic, but it eases workers' anxieties about the future, which benefits the company too.

From Diane Crispell, "How to Manage a Chaotic Workplace," American Demographics, June 1996, pp. 50-52.

SPEAKING EMPLOYEES' LANGUAGE

When a company is planning significant change, it needs to effectively communicate these plans to its frontline employees, the people who actually make the product or deliver the service. According to many communications consultants, the changes should be explained personally by the company's top leaders, either at mass meetings or through a video or an article in the company publication. Consultants often add that the changes should be explained in the context of the company's mission and values.

But such advice is mistaken, for two reasons:

- As employees well know, the only effective way to communicate about mission and values is to exhibit them in one's behavior. Talk about values only tends to make workers suspicious. As a rule, they will adopt management's values only when they are persuaded that such values will help them reach their own personal goals.

- Employees generally do not find corporate leaders persuasive. According to a 1989 study by Philip Mirvis and Donald Kanter, 43 percent of workers believe that managers cheat and lie. The corporate leader who plans to announce big changes at a mass meeting is only asking for trouble—especially if employ-

ees suspect that the changes will include job layoffs. Workers are likely to ignore the message if it is delivered by means of an article or video. Those who do not ignore it will probably make fun of it. Mirvis and Kanter found that frontline employees, because they distrust corporate leaders, are the most cynical group in any business.

Companies should realize that the true experts in communicating with frontline employees are neither company leaders nor communications consultants, but frontline supervisors. Workers already know and trust their supervisors because they speak a language—about facts, not mission and values—that employees can easily understand.

A company that is planning change should therefore hold two rounds of briefings with its supervisors. In the first round, company leaders describe the proposed changes and ask for supervisors' recommendations. In the second round, the leaders describe the final plan. Meanwhile, the supervisors will have briefed the company's frontline employees thoroughly.

From T. J. Larkin and Sandar Larkin, "Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees," Harvard Business Review, May-June 1986, pp. 95-104.