

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING THE PARENTAL LEAVE TRANSITION

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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), 71% of mothers and 92% of fathers were in the workforce in 2020. More than half of mothers and fathers were struggling to juggle work and family responsibilities even before COVID-19 became an issue (Pew Research Center 2017) and the coronavirus pandemic created work-family conflicts that have forced many parents, especially mothers, out of their jobs. Nearly four times as many women (863,000) as men (216,000) had stopped looking for work by September 2020, and though men are gaining jobs in 2021, women are continuing to exit the labor force in large numbers (NWLC, 2021). The roadblocks facing working parents in the United States, which start when they become parents with a lack of paid parental leave and transition support, are not a problem for parents to solve alone. Although a growing number of private businesses are starting to offer paid parental leave (and a subset even offer transition support benefits such as coaching, training, or resources), many employees do not have access to this benefit. In the meantime, companies are in a unique

position to innovate, influence and improve how parental leave is experienced in the United States.

The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that does not provide a federal paid family leave policy (Chzen et al. 2019). This means that roughly only 20% of U.S. employees have access to even one day of paid leave. Many assume they are covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). But the FMLA, passed in 1993, simply provides a subset of new parents 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave and continuing insurance coverage. FMLA covers just over half (56%) of the workforce, leaving 44% ineligible (Brown et al. 2020). Too often, even those who are eligible are unable to take this time off because they cannot afford the loss of income. Particularly concerning is that the protection afforded by FMLA disproportionately excludes low-wage workers, employees in nontraditional jobs, and Black and Hispanic working parents (National Partnership for Women and Families 2018).

Because the United States lags behind other countries in regard to having a universal, comprehensive policy and common practice to protect and support families and their employers, parents and businesses are forced to make difficult and often impossible decisions with little or no guidance. However, the parental leave landscape has been changing and is poised for a big shift. Currently, six states (California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Washington) and Washington, D.C., have enacted paid family leave policies and three more (Connecticut, Oregon and Colorado) have passed paid family leave and are in the process of enacting it. Bolstered by bipartisan support, it is looking increasingly possible that a paid parental and family leave policy will soon be passed at the federal level. An average of 84% of U.S. Senate battleground voters support paid leave, including 96% of Democrats, 81% of Independents, 74% of Republicans, and 74% of Trump voters (Global Strategy Group 2021) as well as 69% of small business owners (Lake Research Partners 2020).

In fact, at press time, the Build Back Better Act, President Biden's social infrastructure and climate change bill, is in the U.S. Senate for consideration after being passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. As written, the bill includes four weeks of paid family and medical leave, which is scaled back from an original 12 weeks. While four weeks is a short amount of time as compared to other countries, it would give the United States its first federal paid leave policy and provide economic relief to millions of families and their employers.

Even if a federal policy passes both houses of Congress, there is much to be learned from the state-level progress and deficiencies. These state-level programs have enabled more people access to parental leave and have also provided an avenue for researchers to assess what works — and what doesn't. The results make it clear that paid parental leave is good for individuals, organizations and communities (Appelbaum and Milkman 2015; Bedard and Rossin-Slater 2016; Houser and Vartanian 2012). But there is still significant progress to be made when it comes

to implementation. Our research continually shows that employers, managers and expecting-parent employees all face significant confusion and frustration as they attempt to navigate new programs, find answers and access support. With a federal policy on the horizon, we strongly recommend that companies do not wait to prepare. Instead, we advise companies to act now to ensure their organizations are poised to make this transition, positioned with a culture that is ready and able to harness this opportunity to lead the way with a competitive advantage.

We will start by providing an inclusive and comprehensive definition of parental leave. Then, informed by decades of experience and research, we will illustrate what happens when parental leave goes wrong — including employee frustration, demoralization and turnover. Next, we will highlight what happens when parental leave is done right and illuminate why a paid and supported parental leave benefit is likely an organization's most overlooked leadership development and human growth opportunity. We will also share parental leave best practices, including what to include when developing policy and building an inclusive and family-friendly culture within companies. Finally, we will share a brief overview of 10 key evidence-based moments, we call them touchpoints, that, when done well, are able to provide employees (and their managers) with the support they need to successfully transition from working person to working parent.

DEFINING PARENTAL LEAVE: LANGUAGE MATTERS

It is important to build a shared language and understanding, starting with the term parental leave. When most people hear these words, they still think of traditional maternity leave: the time a mother is away from work to give birth, be at home with her new baby and recover from childbirth. This is a very limited view that (unintentionally) reinforces prejudices and inequity and misses the bigger picture and the opportunities inherent in this major life transition. Parental leave is used here to describe any leave, inclusive of all gender identities, that provides time off from work to welcome and bond with a new child — however that child became a member of the family — as well as heal from childbirth (if applicable).

It is important to acknowledge that language and imagery customarily used around parental leave are problematically heteronormative and skew toward assuming a traditional birth as the path to parenthood. We urge you to recognize that families and parenthood exist across race, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation. Families can be formed by different processes, including through birth, adoption, surrogacy, fostering and other innovative ways. Inclusivity is vital to our workplaces and our society and often our language, and even our awareness, isn't as quick to evolve as our family structures. To create a work culture that is welcoming, strive to use parental leave language that honors the diversity among your employees and fosters experiences of inclusion.

Average annual costs for in-center care range from \$9,000 to \$24,000 per child.

WHEN WE GET PARENTAL LEAVE WRONG

When we fail to support working parents with good policies and practices, the detrimental ripple effect is vast. Yet we often fail to realize its profound impact because this is simply the way we have always done things in the United States. As daunting and depressing as it may be, it is important for you to have a high-level understanding of how this systemic failure to properly support the parental leave transition can hurt us all.

Working Families Suffer

Having a baby is a financial double-whammy. New parents experience lost income while staying home to recover from birth (if applicable) and bond with their new child, while at the same time facing some of the most expensive bills of their lifetime. In 2015, the average cost of giving birth was \$4,500 with insurance (Moniz et al. 2020). Actual costs can reach up to \$20,000, with factors such as insurance coverage, geographic location, birthing location and medical challenges or complications all influencing the final total (Johnson et al. 2020). Increasingly, hopeful parents also have to rely on lengthy and expensive fertility treatments or adoption processes in order to welcome a baby into their family. This can add tens of thousands of dollars to the budget (Katz et al. 2011; Dodge 2020).

When parents do go back to work, they face additional financial hurdles due to escalating costs of child care. According to the Economic Policy Institute (2020), average annual costs for in-center care range from \$9,000 to \$24,000 per child, with exceedingly higher costs for at-home care. Confronted with this reality, the most financially sensible decision in the short term is often for one parent to leave the workforce to stay at home. Cultural expectations that women should be the primary caregivers, and their overall lower incomes resulting from the gender wage gap, mean that women are often the ones who step back from their careers. Fifty-five percent of mothers are employed full time compared to 89% of fathers (Pew 2019) — a personal loss for mothers financially and professionally, and a loss for the businesses now deprived of the existing and potential future contributions of these employees. At the same time, fathers often absorb additional earnings pressure and miss out on the benefits gained from being an involved and equal caregiver and partner at home.

Some new parents will also struggle with mental health challenges after welcoming a baby into their family. Many will not seek treatment because of stigma around mental health, particularly because societal expectations are that

new parents should be experiencing bliss. One in five new mothers (Postpartum Support International 2014) and one in 10 new fathers (Paulson & Bazemore 2010) experience a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder. These parents require time to seek treatment before being expected to return to work at their full potential. Insufficient paid parental leave policies rush them to return before they are ready. Combine this with the fact that 25% of birthing mothers are back to work within two weeks of giving birth (Lerner 2015) and you'll understand why we created the first perinatal mental health screening to be used in a workplace setting (see: <https://cplleadership.com/oursolutions/#plta>).

Managers Are Left to Fend for Themselves

Parents aren't the only ones affected by the policy and practice vacuum around parental leave. Managers and supervisors face serious challenges when one of their staff is planning to welcome a new child. Most companies lack a transparent process to let employees know what benefits are available, much less a standardized procedure to help them prepare to hand off their duties and pick them back up when they return. Managers are often left without resources to figure out how to juggle the workload as well as the tools needed to provide support to the new parent and cover team.

Additionally, managers are not trained in what to say and how to say it. Many are afraid to say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing and sparking hurt feelings — or worse, a gender or pregnancy discrimination lawsuit. This moment could be a powerful opportunity to increase team trust and communication, provide support to new parents (thus boosting employee loyalty and retention) and grow junior staff members' skills during the coverage period. Instead, it is often handled so badly that it has all the opposite effects: communication fails, morale dips and people quit.

Companies Are at a Disadvantage

A growing number of organizations are recognizing that a good paid and supported leave policy is a desirable component of their benefit packages (SHRM and Oxford Economics 2020). Companies that fail to stay on top of this trend will lose in many ways, including:

- Loss of talent (often to competitors)
 - Missed opportunities to attract top applicants
 - Increased turnover
 - Particularly detrimental to female talent pipeline
- Administrative turmoil
 - Confusion and frustration surrounding who can take leave, when and how
 - Inability to navigate the changing leave laws

- Disorganization when employees come back to work often results in a chaotic and uncertain return, mismanaged work and frustrated clients and stakeholders

■ Inequitable experiences

- Inconsistent practices result in parental leave experiences determined by variable contextual factors, including miscommunication and individual differences in manager support
- Potential exposure to legal liabilities and litigation

■ Employees are not ready to be back

- Exhausted parents are a safety risk. AAA reports that someone who sleeps less than five hours has the same crash risk as a drunk driver (Tefft, 2016). Many parents of babies younger than 1 year average much less sleep than that. Consider the effects of employee sleep debt in the workplace, especially if heavy equipment or important decisions are involved.
- Increased absenteeism and presenteeism
- Counterproductive work behaviors.

WHEN WE GET PARENTAL LEAVE RIGHT

Although the lack of parental leave support in the United States has resulted in limited data, we can look to other countries where paid leave has been established, and to the states and organizations that have been leaders here. That data show us that paid leave policies and supporting practices are vital for individuals, families, employers and communities. Discussed next are some positive outcomes associated with well-supported parental leave, including better health and well-being for employees, families and workplaces; greater inclusion of all types and levels of working parents; and enhanced competitive advantage.

Better Health and Well-Being

Healthier Children

When working parents are provided paid leave and supported throughout the three phases of parental leave — preparing for leave, during leave and returning from leave — their children are more likely to thrive in the short and long term. For starters, they are more likely to survive. In 2019, the U.S. infant mortality rate (6 per 1000 live births) was double those in countries where paid leave is available (OECD 2021). Paid leave has been strongly linked to reduced mortality, with researchers estimating 600 infant and post-neonatal deaths could be prevented in the United States by providing 12 weeks of job-protected paid leave (Patton et al. 2017).

Additionally, when parents are able to stay at home in those early weeks and months, they have more time to establish the type of consistent, caring, connected relationship that is essential for a child's cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral development (Zero to Three and National Partnership for Women and Families

2018). For example, breastfeeding has numerous health benefits for children (and mothers) and is more likely to be successfully initiated and last longer when mothers have paid leave (Mirkovic et al. 2016). Parents are better able to follow through with the recommended well-child doctor visits that occur frequently in the first months, ensure their children stay up-to-date with necessary immunizations and identify and address developmental concerns that may require early intervention (Berger et al. 2005; Kammerman 2006). In addition to the long-term benefits of preventive health care, research from Norway indicates increased graduation rates, college attendance and income at 30 years old in response to implementation of four months of mandatory paid leave (Carneiro et al. 2015). Notably, children with mothers who were less educated and who had less access to leave prior to the paid leave program experienced the largest gains.

Research from Norway indicates increased graduation rates, college attendance and income at 30 years old in response to implementation of mandatory paid parental leave.

Healthier Mothers and Birthing Parents

Worldwide, the maternal death rate is decreasing. But in the United States, that number is rising. In 2017 (pre-COVID), for every 100,000 live births, the United States experienced the loss of 19 mothers — more than three times the rate in the European Union and nearly twice the rate in Canada (WHO et al. 2019). As with infant mortality rates, this loss of life is disproportionately experienced by mothers of color. For example, Black, Native American and Alaska Native mothers die from pregnancy-related complications at four to five times the rate of White women, regardless of their income or education level (CDC 2019a).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2019b) reported that 60% of U.S. pregnancy-related deaths are preventable. More than half of maternal deaths occur postpartum, with the majority occurring within the first six weeks, and a significant percentage occurring up to a year after giving birth (Tikkannen et al. 2020). Paid parental leave is crucial for providing new mothers the opportunity to heal and address postpartum health complications. During this time when new mothers may be primarily attuned to their babies' needs, paid parental leave allows them the opportunity to focus on their own health. In addition to physical recovery, research shows that each additional week of leave that a mother takes within the first three months after childbirth is associated with lower odds of experiencing postpartum depression symptoms (Kornfeind and Sipsma 2018). Supporting new

mothers in taking this time will enable a more successful and productive return to work when they are ready.

Healthier Fathers and Non-Birthing Parents

While fathers often face different issues than mothers, it is important to highlight their transition challenges. Dads often feel extreme pressure to “provide” for their families, which can lead to overwork and a lack of self-care, with serious health impacts. Fathers and other non-birthing parents are not immune to perinatal mental health challenges, with one in 10 U.S. fathers experiencing depression and anxiety after their child’s birth (Paulson and Bazemore 2010). Often, they do not seek help until they are in crisis. Partners of a birthing parent often internalize any emotional or physical difficulties that their partner or child may encounter as a reflection on themselves and something that they need (and want) to fix. They can be left feeling inadequate and unsure of how to step into their critical role (Singley and Edwards 2015).

When we look at outcomes in cases where dads receive paid leave and cultural support for time at home, we see how much it helps. For example, a study of a 2012 Swedish law that granted fathers more access to parental leave found that their partners’ need for prescription anti-anxiety medications decreased by 26% (Miller 2019). When fathers take paternity leave, they are more confident as parents, have better relationships with their partners and are less likely to be separated or divorced for as many as six years later (Petts et al. 2020).

Healthier Relationships at Work and at Home

When new parents have adequate time, space and support during the transition to parenthood, it makes for healthier relationships in all spheres. At work, when communication is open and honest and leave planning is thoughtful and transparent, the relationship between the new parent and their manager (and often their team and HR) is strengthened. Team communication and trust improves when the handoff of duties is clear and well-communicated and everyone understands their temporary role. Successful transitions can be used as a model for other teams in the organization and can become standard best practice. At home, parents can bond with their new child and — if there are two parents — with each other, to form equitable caregiving divisions that will prevent future strife and allow them to return to work with confidence that their home is a haven to refuel and restore.

Improved Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Including a well-thought-out, paid and supported parental leave policy should be part of every diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) program.

Gender Equity

Women across all races still make only 82 cents for every dollar men make (Bleiweis, 2020). Only 6% of S&P 500 companies have female CEOs (Catalyst 2021). One of the biggest reasons that women have not yet achieved equity in the workplace is our cultural assumptions about who should be responsible for caregiving at home. Women are de facto caregivers and face bias, whether conscious or unconscious, that they are not as dedicated to their careers because of their current or possible future caregiving responsibilities. Yet, when women are provided paid leave, they are more likely to remain in the workforce (working longer hours and with up to 50% less attrition) (Schulte et al. 2017). Paid leave policies have also been shown to mitigate the gender wage gap. In workplaces where fathers take leave, women earn more — nearly a 7% earnings increase for each month a father takes (Johansson 2010). Additionally, when men are empowered and encouraged to be equal caregivers at home, everyone benefits. Men report greater loyalty and increased job satisfaction because of parental leave benefits, and fathers who take leave report a deeper bond with their child, more confidence in caregiving, greater life satisfaction, and a stronger relationship with their partner (Harrington et al. 2019). To promote gender equity at work and at home, parental leave policies need to be gender-neutral and all employees should be encouraged, even required, to take their full leave benefit.

The wealth disparities faced by the majority of families of color mean that the financial burdens of welcoming a child are disproportionately onerous.

Racial Financial Equity

The wealth disparities faced by the majority of families of color in the United States mean that the financial burdens of welcoming a child, including health care costs and loss of income, are disproportionately onerous. The U.S. Federal Reserve reports median wealth is \$24,100 for Black families, \$36,100 for Hispanic families, and \$188,200 for White families. In other words, White families have nearly eight times the wealth of Black families and more than five times the wealth of Hispanic families (Bhutta et al. 2020). Further, all non-White groups have higher poverty levels and less access to health care and credit than their White counterparts (Prosperity Now 2019). Fewer financial resources result in less ability to absorb the loss of income from an unpaid parental leave, contributing to 62% of Black adults and 73% of Latino adults being either ineligible for or unable to afford unpaid leave, compared to 60% of White adults unable to do so (National

Partnership for Women and Families 2018). Further, Black and Hispanic women are more likely than White women to lose their jobs after giving birth (Laughlin 2011). Intentionally designed paid and supported parental leave programs can help to reduce these inequities by decreasing financial barriers, unconscious bias and job security concerns.

Inclusion of All Types of Families and Workers

A “perfect family” was once envisioned as a husband, wife, 2.5 kids and a dog. But this model is clearly outdated and does not reflect the reality of today’s families. According to 2020 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, less than 20% of American households are structured as traditional nuclear families (Mahowald and Boesch 2021). A good policy embraces employees’ families however they are defined and appreciates the diverse perspectives and insights each brings.

Competitive Advantage

Parental leave is potentially your most overlooked opportunity to improve your business and enhance your competitive advantage. A well-informed and administered program can improve recruitment, retention, presenteeism and help to communicate and reinforce company culture, values and branding. Businesses benefit through reduced costs and higher productivity. For example, increased retention saves companies from spending 50% to 200% of an employee’s annual salary on direct replacement and turnover-related costs (Allen 2008). Additionally, new parents who come back to work well-rested are healthier, more present, more engaged, more innovative and are better leaders as well as team players (Barnes and Watson 2019).

Organizations that support new parents through generous policies and strong support practices can realize many dividends. Researchers assessing the impact between family-friendly practices and workplace performance in more than 2,000 UK businesses discovered that companies with parental leave policies were 60% more likely to report above-average financial performance than those without leave (Gray 2002). In the United States, studies from states that have enacted paid leave echo these findings. California was the first state to roll out paid family leave (PFL) in 2002. Despite employer concerns prior to its passage, the majority of businesses report neutral or positive effects on productivity, performance and morale; minimal impact on business operations; and no issues with people misusing the program (Appelbaum and Milkman 2011). This was especially true for small businesses. Similar results were reported from PFL studies in New Jersey (Lerner and Appelbaum 2014) and New York (Bartel et al. 2021). In New York, employers also reported having an easier time managing workers’ absences after PFL was implemented. Taken together, the continually emerging evidence makes clear that, at the very least, paid family leave will not hurt the business’s bottom line. And even more promising, it provides the opportunity to help businesses thrive.

GUIDANCE FOR HR PROFESSIONALS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Make Changes Within Your Organization

Even companies with the best of intentions often struggle to get parental leave right. Employees and managers end up confused and frustrated, often damaging their relationships and leaving parental leave programs largely underutilized. Policy is critical, and policy alone is not enough. Supporting practices must be put in place to require — and influence — larger culture change.

The first step is to assess what is currently working and what is not. Invite input from different levels of your business and across divisions. Then, follow through on good intentions — develop an action plan and put a budget behind it. It can be useful to bring in a policy expert to help with some or all of this process, including drafting policy language. In our research and experience, it is clear that even organizations that are doing things well could be doing them better.

Improve Policy and Practices

Informed by the assessment and planning stages, you will be ready to develop a parental leave policy that will enable your employees and business to thrive. Some things to consider:

I Policy **language** should be:

- Comprehensive, yet clearly and simply stated
- Gender-neutral
- Inclusive of all ways children are welcomed into families: birth, adoption, surrogacy, foster placement, kinship families, etc.

I Policy **benefits** should:

- Be designed for equitable access
- Allow for full or close to full wage replacement
- Not have a waiting period for new hires
- Not count against an employee's PTO
- Allow leave to be used consecutively or intermittently
- Account for any state- or federal-level leave policies and/or other legal requirements

I Policy **administration** should include:

- Dedicated and sufficient budget
- Training to educate managers and employees
- Timelines and checklists for all requirements
- Easy access to resources and required materials
- A specific, knowledgeable and kind point of contact
- Transparent communication
- Consistent implementation across the organization.

Create a Culture of Support

A comprehensive parental leave policy is a great start for communicating to employees that parents are valuable members of the organization and sets the foundation on which a positive parental leave culture can grow. Beyond policy, employees need to hear, from all levels of the organization, that they are expected to take advantage of their full leave benefits and that the company supports them in doing so. Employees should also understand that their company has put the necessary structures in place for managers and HR to be trained and given sufficient resources and tools to manage the leave experience well.

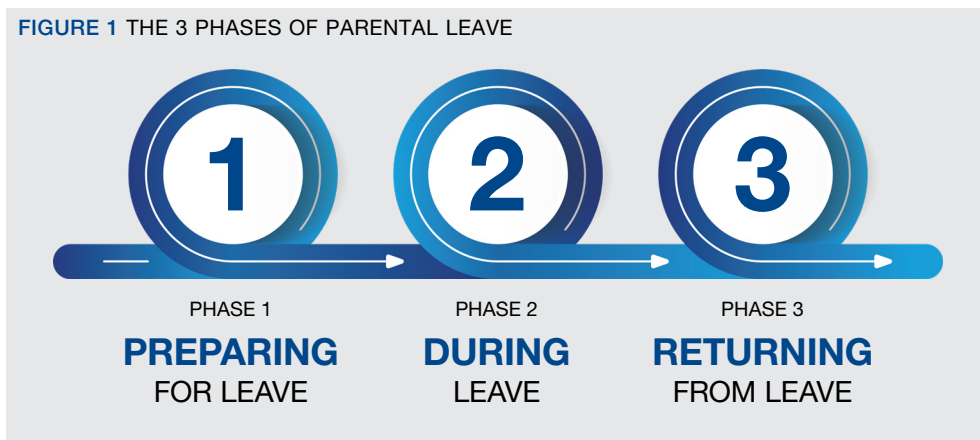
HR professionals play a critical role in setting the tone for employee experiences. Trying to make sense of parental leave laws and policies can often be incredibly confusing. An effective HR representative is a key partner for employees, helping them navigate the process to develop a leave and return plan, understand how much time to take off, how much pay (if any) they will receive, impacts on bonus or commission amount, and flexible options for returning such as part-time or phased-in return. When the time comes, HR can ensure preparations have been made to facilitate an easy and efficient return experience. For example, making sure employees have access to buildings and technology, and helping employees learn how to access and use any additional or ongoing family-friendly benefits. As a primary point of contact in navigating parental leave, HR can strongly influence the employee's experience and their perceptions of organizational support for parental leave, which in turn influences what new parents communicate to colleagues, potential recruits and on messaging boards.

Similarly, a boss can make or break the parental leave experience. Managers and supervisors are often the first to be told about the upcoming arrival of an employee's new child, and they generally have a great deal of influence over an employee's day-to-day work life. Therefore, how they respond and interact with the new parent employee, and how that is witnessed by and communicated to the team, is a vital component for developing a positive (or negative) parental leave culture. This time period provides managers an opportunity to increase trust, communication and morale as well as to develop the skills of the team. To unlock these benefits, organizational leaders must empower managers by developing their knowledge, skills and abilities around parental leave. Leadership development coupled with a transparent, standardized (yet flexible) process will ensure managers understand the whys and hows for supporting their direct reports — both new parents and their larger team.

Managing the Parental Leave Transition

Expanding on the general definition presented earlier, it is helpful to define parental leave as having three periods of transition that all new parents experience. We define those as:

FIGURE 1 THE 3 PHASES OF PARENTAL LEAVE



- **Phase 1:** *Preparing for leave* – employee is still working and focused on career stability while preparing for changes at both work and home.
- **Phase 2:** *During leave* – employee is at home, shifting focus onto new parenting role while taking time to bond with their new child and family.
- **Phase 3:** *Returning from leave* – employee is back to work and focused on integrating the dual roles of worker and parent into a new, singular work-parent role.

Each phase has its own focus, its own set of touchpoints and its own set of role changes. When you understand how to handle these touchpoints and role shifts well, you significantly improve your chances of being able to support and retain employees while also managing the practical aspects of leave in a way that ensures productivity goals are met.

Making Leave Manageable: The Ten Transition Touchpoints Framework

Across the three phases of leave, there are 10 pivotal opportunities for policy and practice to direct the employee experience. Knowing how to navigate these milestones empowers HR and managers to foster a positive parental leave transition. Next is a summary of each of these transition touchpoints and a brief example of how a manager can use them in practice:

Phase 1: Preparing for Leave

- **1A:** *Announcement* – the first opportunity to set the tone for the full three-phase parental leave transition; a heartfelt congratulations and positive, proactive response is a great place to start; connect the employee with appropriate resources and offer support.
- **2A:** *Assessment* – stop and reflect on how this change affects your new parent, your team, and your own projects and goals; take time to consider the big picture; check in with your new parent employee to see what they need to be successful.
- **3A:** *Action Plan* – meet with your new parent employee to actively decide on and document a leave plan that will serve as a reference throughout the three

phases of transition; recognize contingency plans and revisions may be necessary to ensure the plan stays relevant and useful for all.

- **4A:** *Acknowledge Transition to Parenthood* – as the leave date approaches, mark the occasion in a meaningful way; your visible and authentic support is critical to encourage their return — by letting them know they are an integral team member who will be missed, you are planting the seeds for their sustainable and successful retention. Remember babies operate on their own timeline, so don't wait too long.

Phase 2: During Leave

- **5A:** *Appropriately Keep in Touch* – begin by congratulating your new parent when their child arrives; then follow the communication strategy that they will have outlined in their leave plan; check in with the cover team and use this as an opportunity to cross-train and build skills; keep your new parent employee apprised of any unexpected, significant changes if that is what they have requested.
- **6A:** *Advocate* – be mindful of how your new parent employee is discussed and considered while they are on leave; make sure their name is brought into conversations in positive and supportive ways to ensure equal opportunities; also recognize the cover team and consider their extra work in performance and bonus discussions; showing your loyalty to your new parent and team instills respect and appreciation for you as a manager and helps build a family-supportive workplace culture.
- **7A:** *Arrangements for Return* – make efforts to ensure the return is as straightforward and supported as possible; revisit the onboarding portion of the action plan; check that logistics and technology are in place for a smooth first day back; include the full team in re-entry planning and communications so they are aware of, and have input into, the return.

Phase 3: Returning to Work

- **8A:** *Acknowledge Transition to Working Parenthood* – acknowledge the magnitude of your employee's return from leave and their transition into working parenthood; the importance of your efforts on this day cannot be overstated and will help remind them they matter to you, your team, and the organization.
- **9A:** *Adjustment* – your new parent may experience some culture shock as they integrate back into the team and learn how to navigate the dual roles of worker and parent; avoid making any assumptions about what they need – communicate and ask; remain open and flexible while making options clear; schedule periodic check-ins to provide and receive feedback as a new normal is established.
- **10A:** *Access to Ongoing Career Development* – don't assume they want to put their career ambitions on hold; schedule regular time to check in and discuss career progression and needs; set time aside, whether it's six months or a year after your new parent's return, to celebrate their progress, and set them up for

long-term success; reflect back for personal leadership growth and organizational recommendations; look forward to envision and prepare for the future with the skills everyone now has; check in with new parent to ensure engagement and alignment with broader business and team goals.

The 10 Transition Touchpoints framework is part of the Center for Parental Leave Leadership's RETAIN Parental Leave Coaching method, an evidence-based, theoretical pedagogy and practice developed by Amy Beacom, Ed.D., during the past 15 years to create a field of parental leave coaching and support for employers and employees. This framework integrates seven bodies of research: transition theory, executive coaching, adult learning, role and identity, career development, life stage and work-life balance.

CONCLUSION

Organizations have a time-sensitive opportunity to position themselves as forward-thinking leaders prepared to prosper from the numerous employee and organizational benefits that come with providing well-developed paid and supported parental leave programs. Businesses should not wait until paid leave is made mandatory and they are left scrambling to comply. Those organizations that take the steps now to develop a robust parental leave policy and support program for parents and managers can establish themselves at the forefront of this movement and communicate to current and future employees that they matter and are cared for, positioning themselves to reap bottom-line business gains. ■

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