

How Busy Executives Can Manage on the Home Front

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Recently the vice president for marketing at an international company was virtually ordered to cancel a long-delayed trip to Bermuda with his wife. On the eve of his departure his president told him that the chairman of the board, based in Europe, would be flying in on the Concorde at 10 a.m. the next day and would be leaving at 4 p.m. the same day. "He wants to hear us make the presentation of the new marketing program," said the president, "and only you can do it." The vice president demurred, arguing that his assistant could do the job just as well. "Do you want a career or a file cabinet?" asked the president. Undaunted by the suggestion that he might wind up as a clerk, the man left for Bermuda. On his return, he learned that his assistant now has caught the admired attention of the chairman.

We all know such stories, and of the tensions between business obligation and family commitment. Last August The Wall Street Journal and the Gallup Organization reported that a substantial majority of executives surveyed believe success in business requires the making of "personal and family sacrifices." The data suggests that "chief executives typically work 60 to 70 hours a week, travel six to 10 days a month and give up many of their weekends."

This is not just a product of the American culture but is characteristic of all industrial societies. It is a culmination of the process that began when the Industrial Revolution took the father out of the home and left the mother to raise, cosset and discipline the children. Now many women, too, are pursuing demanding careers. So both men and women are having to make family sacrifices if they wish to succeed in many organizations.

Yet many executives do find a way, despite some ragged edges, to fit a satisfying family life into the pattern of a successful career. They do it by recognizing that life does not always require the big, dramatic solution to problems, that outcomes often depend on doing a series of small things consistently. Here are some of the practices that have become almost habitual with them:

- 1. They do not hide behind alibis.** They are frank with members of the family and discuss conflicts between home and job whenever they arise.
- 2. They schedule some time exclusively for the family.** These may be short intervals or sustained periods like long week ends and vacations. On such occasions, they do not allow work to interrupt, except in the most extreme emergencies.
- 3. Even when working at home, they take breaks to renew contact.** They recall Eleanor Roosevelt's advice to a friend in the armed services: "When you go home and get engrossed in work, see that you stop long enough now and then-even when she is working with you-to make her feel she is first in your life, even more important than saving the world. Every woman wants to be first to someone sometime in her life." Mrs. Roosevelt had reason to know.
- 4. They pay attention to small ceremonial family events.** Remembering birthdays, bringing home flowers, making bright conversation at the dinner table, arranging to dine out on an anniversary-such activities are perfectly consistent with the skills that have made the husband a captain of industry.
- 5. When traveling on business, they call home frequently.** And the conversation is more than perfunctory: It deals with substantive family matters: allows the wife to get things off her chest, if necessary: demonstrates an interest in each of the family members.

6. They share part of their business life with the family. Of course, they do not try to relive the day. But they assume that their wives and children are interested and intelligent, and want a general knowledge of what is happening to the husband or parent.

7. They make significant use of family time. Just as the executive knows the value of his working time, so too he seeks to make the most effective possible use of his time at home. He remains as wide awake to the interests of spouse and children as he would to those of a customer.

In short, the basic instruments he must use, at home as in the office, are his executive skills. Two are involved: the ability to communicate and the ability to delegate.

The first requires a facility in maintaining contact. What counts, however, is not necessarily frequency of contact but true depth of association when contact is made. The second skill, the art of delegating, begins with the executive's definition of what he may and what he should not delegate.

If an executive decides that family responsibilities are tasks that only he can handle, then the home can take as firm a place in his schedule of activities as any other of his non-delegable activities. And the same principle applies as with all other non-delegable tasks: If a conflict of demands requires that one must be neglected at a given moment, there is a clear understanding that the executive must compensate for the omission at the earliest possible moment.

Much will be gained as top management clarifies its own policy and determines what it expects of its people. It cannot simultaneously demand of its executives the impeccable domestic behavior of a Presbyterian minister and total dedication to the needs of the company. The criteria should be made clear in advance to those who seek promotion and to those already in the executive suite.

But the primary responsibility continues to rest on the individual to define his own values. Besieged by a press and media that denigrate his business efforts and that extol the virtues of personalism, a butt of soap operas and women's magazines, the executive must make his choice. Specifically, he must answer these questions:

Is he prepared to live with the tension that will come if he strives to be both top man in his organization and the beloved patriarch of his home?

Given the new pressures that exist in the business scene of the 1980's, is he prepared to withstand the demands and reproaches of peers, subordinates and superiors if he opts for family priorities?

If he decides to take vows as a "monk of industry," will he be able to live with the judgment that his family and the community may render, and can he gain his satisfactions from knowing that his business activity, as a whole, serves his nation and ultimately his family?

As Americans wrestle with this kind of problem, it may be useful to remember that a society needs all kinds of people the footloose and the home-bound.

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