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Column: Workers and Holiday Stress

By Joyce M. Rosenberg, The Associated Press for *thewashingtonpost.com*—Wednesday, November 22, 2006

NEW YORK—Stress during the holiday times is a given for many people, and those who work for a small business may feel particularly pressured if they want to take time off for their children's holiday plays, to pick relatives up at the airport or even to get some shopping done. Many small company owners find ways to help their workers out—and actually get more productivity out of the deal.

First, an owner needs to have the attitude that a worker's personal life matters, even if the staff is small and there's plenty of work to be done.

"The more an employee feels contented in the workplace, and believes in management, the more productive they'll be and care about the goals of management," said Frank Kenna, president of The Marlin Co., a workplace communications consulting firm based in North Haven, Conn.

So, he suggests, let the employee go for a few hours to attend a child's performance, or to do whatever he or she needs.

"If you have that employee sitting there from 3:00 to 4:30 knowing the play is on and you didn't allow them to go there, they're going to be anti-productive," he said. "But if you let them go, they'll feel much better about working for the company, and they'll probably make up more than that hour and a half that they missed."

Flex-time, which some owners call flex-scheduling, is a popular way for small business owners to make life easier for everyone during the holidays.

Smith-Winchester, a Southfield, Mich.-based company that provides advertising and other business communication services, has a year-round policy that allows workers to leave early when they need to, as long as they make up the time. The company also gives employees five personal days a year.

Frank Morisette, the chief operating officer, says the policy more than pays off for the company; workers stay late, sometimes until 10 p.m., knowing that the company will be understanding when they need some flexibility.

"We've found that if you treat the people with respect, and you're not a martinet, they're going to work with you. They'll understand," Morisette said.

Traci Bisson, owner of Bisson Barcelona, a public relations firm in Barrington, N.H., has what she calls a flex-lunch policy. It allows workers to take only half an hour instead of an hour for lunch, bank the time and then leave early on a Friday.

She also has a liberal time off policy, and closes the office for Christmas Eve and the day after Christmas.

"All these ideas are a function of everything that I really hated when I was working for other people, especially in the corporate arena," Bisson said. She said she could recall all the holiday tasks she couldn't get done when she was an employee, and said her goal is to help reduce employee stress.

Kenna goes further, saying "one thing companies can do is not add to the pile" employees are trying to tackle during the holidays. So he advocates that owners shift as much work as possible to pre- and post-holiday periods to lighten everyone's load. For example, he said, year-end inventories could be done a little earlier or a little later rather than smack at the end of December.

Obviously, in many companies, especially those whose business picks up at holiday time, it isn't so easy to put work off. In such cases, employees need to know from the time they're hired that they should expect to be working full-tilt through the holidays.

But there may be other solutions for small businesses who want to reduce holiday stress. Smith-Winchester, for example, will bring in temporary workers as needed to get projects done during the holidays, Morisette said.

Kenna noted that business owners need to be concerned not only about employees' stress levels during the holidays, but their own. His advice is to take a few hours or an afternoon off here and there, to go to your own child's play or do your own shopping. You'll be more relaxed, and that can only help reduce everyone's stress levels, throughout your company. ■



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