

It's time to bring dads into the conversation

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IMAGINE a workplace where women are not the least bit worried that having a baby will damage their job or their career prospects.

Unfortunately, many women do fear having that conversation with their boss.

As a manager, colleague and friend, I have had countless conversations with women who agonise over their decision to have a child. When is a good time? Before my career takes off, or later, once I have established a good position and reputation? What about my partner's career plans? How will my employer react? How will I be treated while pregnant, and what will happen when I return to work? Will I be judged for coming back too early? Or staying away too long? Or asking for part-time hours? Or if I have to leave to collect my sick child from care?

In a modern workplace, we should be striving for a culture where women are not concerned that having children will harm their career prospects or that their job will be downgraded when they return from parental leave.

We have not achieved this yet. The complaints that come to the Fair Work Ombudsman about pregnancy discrimination tell us so. So too the submissions received by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner as part of her Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review.

This issue is so often dominated by the concerns and perspectives of women. It makes sense - after all, it is women who give birth, right? But it's not just mothers who care for and raise a child.

So where are the Dads in this conversation?

In a column It's Mr Dad, not Mr Mum in last week's Daily Telegraph, Sarrah Le Marquand raised this very issue. She talked about how many men are reluctant to take paternity leave for fear of not being taken seriously in the workplace. Modern society does not yet seem to value men in caring roles as much as it does women.

At the Fair Work Ombudsman almost half of the complaints we received about discrimination in the workplace last financial year were related to pregnancy and family and carers' responsibilities, and majority of these came from women.

We do not often hear discrimination complaints from fathers about their parental leave entitlements or family responsibilities.

Under the Fair Work Act both men and women are entitled to 12 months unpaid parental leave (and paid parental leave in many cases) and to ask for flexible working arrangements to care for a child when they return to work. The entitlement allows for a range of different arrangements, reflecting the diverse range of situations different families must balance. I know of some men who access these entitlements - often by becoming the primary care giver for a period after the mother returns to work, having accessed her entitlement.

About 300,000 babies will be born in Australia over the next year, which means tens of thousands of families are now thinking about, discussing and planning how they're going to juggle their careers and their new family responsibilities.

At home, this is not a conversation had only by women. Both parents are part of that conversation. But in the workplace, this conversation focuses on women.

Perhaps it's time to change the conversation.

A recent report by the Business Council of Australia (Increasing the Number of Women in Senior Executive Positions) has highlighted the business case that gender diversity and inclusion can improve business performance. It notes the cost where talented women do not remain or progress in their careers.

There are many challenges for employers and employees in balancing business and individual needs. But if we are serious about harnessing the talents of both genders in the workplace, then perhaps the conversation needs to shift to how we can ensure fathers exercise real choice about the role they play in raising their children.

A business may have policies and procedures in place to support women leaving for, and returning from, parental leave which is a positive step. But employers might ask themselves, do the policies also support fathers who want to take time off?

Employers might also consider the culture of their workplace and how it affects the decisions their employees make.

If they take a look around their organisation, do they see men and women accessing parental leave or flexible work arrangements? Is parental leave encouraged in the workplace, and do employees know what their leave entitlements are? Are they requesting to take this leave? Do people call it parental leave, or is it feminised as "maternity leave"?

They might ponder how people react when they find out a colleague - male or female - is accessing these entitlements. Or whether, formally or informally, those who take leave are encouraged and supported, not subjected to colleagues questioning their work ethic or commitment to their job.

As a starting point, employers should make sure employees know what their entitlements are and encourage them to access them. If they have formal policies, they should apply to men and women and to different types of families. And most importantly, they must also ensure that people who take parental leave are not disadvantaged.

Providing real choice to employees to access leave entitlements, or work hours that balance the needs of their family and the workplace, makes business sense.

An inclusive and flexible culture helps to retain skilled and valued staff members, decreases absenteeism and reduces staff turnover and increases the number of people who return to work after parental leave. It's also a way to improve staff morale, engagement and productivity.

Modern workplaces should work for modern families. We have an opportunity to change the conversation, and foster a culture that sends a message that both men and women's contribution to caring for their children is valued and respected.

Natalie James

Fair Work Ombudsman

The Fair Work Ombudsman's website www.fairwork.gov.au has a range of resources for employers, including a Parental Leave Best Practice Guide they can use to develop best practice policies and procedures. There is also information and resources for parents who want to learn more about their parental leave entitlements at www.fairwork.gov.au/workingparents (www.fairwork.gov.au/find-help-for/parents-and-families). Both employers and employees are also encouraged to call the Fair Work Infoline on 13 13 94 for free advice and assistance.

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