

Research Review: Work-Family/Family-Work Conflict

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Balancing the demands of work and the responsibilities of the family is an ongoing concern in organizational leadership. Today we are busier than ever. Gone are the days of the 40-hour work week, the two-hour lunch, leaving the office on time, and forgetting about office demands until the next business day. With today's advanced technology, such as cell phones with paging and instant messaging, wireless Internet access, and the mobile office following us wherever we go, it is easier to take the office on the road when we travel, even when the road leads home. Once at home, office responsibilities easily impose on family time with a quick call here and an email reply there limiting the amount of quality time available for the family. This incompatibility between the pressures of work and family concerns generates role conflict and stress on the follower.

Researchers define the incompatibility between the domain of work and the domain of family as work-family conflict. Conflict between these domains occurs when participation in one role is more difficult due to participation in the other role. Today, work-family conflict (work interfering with family) is more prevalent than family-work conflict (family interfering with work) though both can occur. However, regardless of the direction of causation, when one domain is discordant with another domain, the result is conflict and increased stress on the individual. Current research focuses on the causes of work-family conflict, balance of time, involvement and satisfaction, quality of life, and the outcomes between the two domains.

Attribution theory states that there are internal and external explanations for work-family and family-work conflict. An internal explanation is the desire to be successful in multiple roles such as mother or father, brother or sister, leader or follower, and peer or subordinate. Internally, work-family conflict occurs when what needs to be accomplished at work interferes with personal values. Personal values may include spending daily quality time with family or simply rejuvenating after a hard day of work. Internally-generated conflict can also occur when family responsibilities such as attending a school function or taking care of a sick child spills over into the responsibilities of work and increases the time spent away from the job. External causes of work-family conflict may occur when your work assignment takes more time to complete than what you have to give or when your spouse is unwilling to support your endeavors both at home and at work. Conflict between these domains also occurs when the amount of control followers have over their job is limited and flexibility is minimal.

Compensation theory suggests that people add more to one domain than the other in order to balance what lacks in either. In other words, life balance is a direct result of the amount of time and psychological resources an individual decides to commit to both domains. If the individual commits more time or psychological resources to work, then work-family conflict may increase. If an individual decides to commit more resources to family than work, but work requirements increase, then family-work conflict also increases.

While the conflict between work and family may be inevitable, researchers such as Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) suggest alternative methods for reducing the stress. For example, more autonomy in the workplace and networking with peers can increase the quality of work life. Their studies show that individuals who work for organizations that allow individuals to spend more time at home, work in virtual employment, and make flexible time arrangements, tend to perform better as a parent than those who do not have these opportunities. Maintaining satisfaction on both fronts is important for reducing the feelings of conflict.

Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) also suggest that individuals should clarify what is important in life and continually experiment with achieving goals. They say that self-identity is the combination of family, work, leisure, and community service. While some individuals are more aware of what they value than others, self-awareness is critical to managing the conflict between the two domains. The decision making process and managing the allotted time between domains is handled best when the individual is aware of their surroundings. Self-awareness reduces the incompatibility between the work domain and the family domain.

Further, these researchers suggest that a more holistic approach to life enhances the quality of life and reduces the conflict between the two domains. Participation in different roles can enrich an individual's life through building strong relationships with individuals in various roles such as a superior, peer or subordinate, a spouse, and/or a community leader.

Experimentation with goals requires the individual to examine goals often and develop new strategies to achieve those goals. More importantly, the individual must be open to change and be willing to ask the hard question of what is truly important in their life. Once they answer the hard question, the individual can then decide what needs to be done to achieve their goals.

Studies have found no differences between men and women in work-family conflict. However, women tend to experience more family-work conflict when there is a child at home less than three years of age. Women also experience more family-work conflict when their spouse does not help with child rearing. Women may also be more likely to take time off from work to care for a sick child than their working spouse.

Work-family and family-work conflict are two phenomena affecting organizational leadership today. An understanding of what causes the conflict between the domains is the first step to resolving their incompatibility. Researchers have identified the causes of these conflicting domains and have provided explanations for these phenomena. Resolution starts with the individual and a self-assessment that focuses on what the individual feels is important in life. Lasting resolution to the conflict between these domains comes through building and sustaining good relationships with others who operate within the conflicting domains of an individual's life.

About the Author

Dr. Jacque King received his Ph.D. in organizational leadership from Regent University and currently serves as assistant professor and director of Regent's Doctor of Strategic Leadership program. His research interests include: perfectionism, self-esteem and self-efficacy in leadership, power in the organizational setting, and organizational development and transformation from a biblical perspective.

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