E8: Creating reasonable operating expectations for the workday with management and motherhood needs expert Leslie Forde

So suddenly, the job was different. I was in a different job. The company's strategies had changed. The requirements for my work had changed. My department had changed and I was short-staffed. So I found myself doing what I think a lot of us do, I was faced with this challenge I didn't expect. And I thought the answer was I guess I'll just work harder. And I would find myself, typing away at the keyboard, trying to put a pillow between myself and the co-sleeper to keep the glow of the computer from waking the baby. And I'd be working one in the morning, two in the morning, three in the morning. Both my children did not sleep through the night until they were 14 months old. So I was waking up in one hour increments. I was sleeping in one hour increments. I had a newborn and a toddler and just found myself depleted. I was exhausted. There were a lot of days where I would drive to the office. And I wouldn't remember how I got there and it was almost an hour away. And then there were days where I would get all the way to the office and I would realize I'd be rushing, racing through the parking garage, trying to get into the building, trying to get up to the nursing room. And then I'd realize when I got all the way up there that I'd left my breast pump at home and I would have to drive all the way back. It still took me over two years to really recover and restore myself after burning out.

So I had not predicted any of that. It was an interesting path. And through that kind of process, I wanted to understand what other mothers were doing. I felt like I must've missed a memo that went out all the working mothers out there. Was there a memo? Did I miss something? Did, was there a conversation that I neglected to have? It was just a casual conversation. I was, I ended up doing some advisory work for a mental health startup and the founder who's a dad said, why are moms so stressed? Because we were talking about moms and as a potential market for the product. And I said there's, Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And then there's mom's hierarchy of needs. And as soon as I said it, I felt it like it clicked for me. I got incredibly curious about what it would look like for other people. I drew it that on a little piece of paper, the first mom's hierarchy of needs.

And then I turned it into a PowerPoint and then 150 moms later after doing a quick survey, my first one for the site, I evolved it to what it looks like now. So I really was looking at this problem that I was having. And because research is in my roots, I started my career even pre resume as a market researcher. It's how I worked, I worked my way through high school and college that I solve problems that way. And that kind of began this process. Once I had the results from the study, I thought I need to share it with people who took the study. And so I guess I need a website and after I put the results up and created the website, I thought I, I want to share more and I want to learn more. And if I can figure this problem out for myself and help other mothers understand why making space for self care and growth is so elusive after having kids and why it's so hard, that would be very meaningful to me. And when I drew that first mom's hierarchy of needs, it looked very similar to how it looks now, but all of those foundational categories are at the bottom, our children's wellbeing and their milestones and their health, their education, their activities. And then the next level would be all the things that we're responsible for at home and our household roles. And then the next layer up would be our professional role or a volunteer role. And then everything way up to the tippy top, where self-care, emotional wellbeing, mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing, all of the things that we do to restore ourselves and reset ourselves live.

The reason that we never get up to the tippy top is because everything down to the bottom is never done. It's never ending. But think about it, right, Jacqueline, pre kids, so many of us conditioned ourselves to decide to care for ourselves or just to other than to go for that workout. Or I'm gonna call that friend, or I'm gonna take that PhD course, or I'm going to learn that language or whatever it is that you want to do.It's I'll do that when everything else, quote-unquote, is done and that, and pre kids that kind of works, right? Because you, you do have a certain amount of discretionary time available to you, but after kids, there is no discretionary time and the work is never done. And until I drew it and visualized it for myself, I hadn't realized I was trying to do the impossible and seeing that it was impossible that the things at the bottom were never done. And the only way that I would make time and make space for the activities at the top would be to make the time. Would be to carve it out. And that allowed me to give myself permission to be ruthless about my schedule and to be ruthless about making time for these activities that were really important to my health and my wellbeing and my fulfillment.

So I wanted to help others learn how to do that for themselves, because it's a very crushing blow when you realize that your life becomes geared toward being in service to everyone else. And, there is no space for yourself anymore. And we all love our families. And I love everything about being a mother. And I love everything about my children and being a mother, but it wasn't, it's not healthy. It's not good for them. It's not good for me. It's not good for my partner, if I'm depleted and exhausted and unable to care for myself. So that was the impetus and it led me to understand from other experts, I've interviewed now incredible mothers who are doing all the things that we're told that we can't do. And incredible experts who have examined every issue of this topic. And I've done a lot of research around all of the personal reasons why it's so hard. And by extension all of the systems reasons that it's hard, why the environments that we live in work in hadn't really been conducive to helping mothers in particular solve this problem.

Pre pandemic face time was always, I think the nemesis of, of the working mother, it was, Hey, like we don't see you at that breakfast meeting or we don't see you at that early morning keynote, or we don't see you at that drinks party after work, or we don't see you in the office at the, at 6:00 PM, it was this, it was like visibility equals work ethic. And there's so many reasons for it, but it's flawed in so many ways and not only hurts mothers, it hurts lots of other people who can't work in that way, but pre pandemic, that was the issue. And now what I've seen in my research is into the pandemic and that study, most organizations have just taken the old rules of work. They've taken this expectation of face time and visibility, and they've just poured it over to zoom. So people are now just spending all their time, all day long, and all evening long on meetings and zoom to prove and demonstrate their commitment and work ethic and they're completely burning out.

They're completely depleted when they actually have to produce deep work in the form of presentations or content or analysis, whatever the work is that they actually do. And they're trying to do it after their kids go to sleep and they're trying to do it in the wee hours of the morning, and they're trying to do it when they have less infrastructure, less support, less access to childcare than they've ever had before. So this broken system of work permeates how challenging it is for mothers to excel and succeed in their careers. But it also has locked a lot of people out of leadership and a lot of people out of having the kind of professional success that they're capable of. I feel very honored and inspired to change how that works in the world.

I saw that mostly mothers, because overwhelmingly moms were telling me everything that they wished they could tell their leadership team, their boss, their HR Department. It was, why are we on so many zooms? Don't, they know my kids are at home and I have to feed them like, have they lost their minds? Or I really need a therapist. And I really need my company to find one for me, but I don't have one woman said, I need somebody who can take text messages. I don't have time to talk to anybody. People were just going on and off of legal and illegal substances to deal with all the stress. People were reeling from the rise in just divisiveness in the US, the rise in racism and how it was personally affecting them. There was a woman early in the study who said this is being called the China virus and now I don't feel safe to walk and now I am experiencing racism and I don't feel safe. And I don't feel that my family is safe. People were losing loved ones. There were pregnant moms in the study who were terrified of being separated from their babies at birth, unable to have their partners in the delivery room. So all of these things were happening, but the strong undercurrent was I need mental health care. I need childcare and I need flexibility at work. And so I got pretty excited and I thought, wow I don't know a lot about the world of HR, but if I could take this data and use it to change the workplace, the system that took me down, that would be incredible.

There's still a lot of anxiety and depression and stress and uncertainty and it's affecting people's lives and really profound ways. But for me, because I was so focused on launching a successful business and pivoting from having been a full-time employee, my entire career to being a full-time entrepreneur. I wasn't that worried about the pandemic. It was in the backdrop. I was, we were locked down. We didn't go anywhere. I, my kids were in remote school and we actually kept them in remote school even after school reopened. So there was a lot of, there was a protocol associated with it. That changed how we lived, but I wasn't as worried about the pandemic as I was about getting the business launched and resetting my career under these extreme circumstances. So it consumed me and in some ways that was probably positive.

So now I would say that in the workplace, the recommendations look like, okay, you need a set of benefits that help caregivers. And that probably means if not curating, then certainly subsidizing ideally subsidizing paying for, and de-stigmatizing access to childcare and elder care support. And mental health care support. And the other two pillars, so there's really four pillars that I make recommendations to employers under and the other two are how to create psychological safety. And to do so in a way that permeates the culture and how to really create flexibility. And by really, I say that because a lot of employers think flexibility is allowing people to work from home because traditionally that's what flexibility meant. It's oh, you want flexibility? You can work from home one or two days a week, or you can work from home when you need to. But when a large part of the workforce started working at home in the pandemic it required more than just taking the old rules of. And putting them onto video, it really required a different way of making decisions, a different way of setting priorities, a different way of navigating key performance indicators and goals, and really a different way of looking at someone as an employee and looking at their life and their circumstances and how to integrate that with the needs of the workplace and doing so with more compassion and more, two-way communication than what most employers are used to.

So those are the types of conversations I have with employers now. And that either becomes a series of workshops and trainings for leaders and managers, so that they can create the cultural change and make the shifts. I'm like, do you really need so many meetings? Come on, tell me really. I'm like, do you really need all those meetings? And you don't, you absolutely don't. And do you need to send that email at nine or 10 o'clock? I guess what you don't. You can work at nine or 10 at night. I work at nine, 10 at night, most nights, but I don't send messages to people on my team. At that time I schedule send the message during the workday people are exhausted and because of the fear that they have about losing their jobs, losing their health care, losing their livelihood, in a global recession, like they're going to answer that email even when they don't want to, they're going to look at that email. It's going to come over on their device. They're going to say, oh, my boss just messaged me. I'm exhausted. I don't want to respond, but they'll respond anyway. And people will break themselves. To perform at work at the expense of their own health at the expense of their family's needs at the expense of their wellbeing.

And unfortunately what happens is in that process of people prioritizing these performative measures right of work. Cause they're not really a measurement of how productive you are. There are measurement of maybe how busy you are or how many hours you spend. And it doesn't allow people the kind of deep work time and mental space to do and think the innovative thoughts and to create the kind of work that is breakthrough for the organization. So I'm trying to show organizations that not only is it bad for your people, it's bad for you. You are not going to get great ideas and you are not going to get innovation out of exhausted, burned out people. By the way, burned out exhausted people are not going to stay with you. People will make these trade-offs and I've seen it throughout the pandemic study, but it really started peaking by November of last year. Like people were feeling like they were doing terribly at everything, especially moms. And in that, values, conflict place of feeling like I'm a terrible mother and a terrible, partner and a terrible worker and a terrible child to my aging parents and a terrible caregiver to myself, like something's going to give, right? No, one's going to stay in that place for long.

When I'm working with an organization in a longer term engagement and they've actually made the commitment. Like, hey, we don't just want Leslie to come in and do a couple of workshops. I do a lot of workshops for employees also and for parents where I teach people how to find their way out of burnout because I've done it. And a lot of people will hire me because they're like, oh, you burned out. You survived burnout. Talk to my people about burnout, because I can see they're burning out. And I'll tell them, yeah, I can do that. I can teach people how not to burn out. I can teach people how to set boundaries and how to recover from burnout because I've done it. But if I drop them into a culture and an environment that is not responsive to allowing them to set healthy boundaries and not responsive to allowing them to work in the same way, then all the work that I do will not be effective. They will either revert back to the culture, the cultural norms that are rewarded or they will leave. It's one of the two. So it's a long answer to your question. On the employer side, it's really a series of starting with how are you handling meetings and how are you handling communication?

And I start with just telling employers that, flip, flip the paradigm from people being on call between the hours of whatever those hours are eight to six or nine to five or whatever your office norms are like instead of it being that people are captive and on-call, and can be available at a moment's notice during those windows. Assume that those people are doing other things and set us much smaller window for synchronous communication.

Let's figure out when you really do have to have meetings with people. And by the way, it should be less than what it is now and establish norms. Like I've had some organizations, for example, one company that I've worked with organization I've worked with for over eight months now for quite a while, since last I guess last September or August is when I started working with them. They carved out meeting free Friday afternoons and they've carved out longer breaks. So around almost all of the holidays of the past year, they've added two or three days so that. Because people were expressing, when I surveyed their employees, a lot of people were expressing that, you know what? I, it's all fine for my leadership to tell me to take care of myself, but if they're still sending me emails constantly and at night and on the weekends and my goals are the same. Then, how am I supposed to take care of myself? And if I take time off, then it means that I'm missing hundreds of emails that I then have to catch up with when I get back. They heard that from the study and started carving out, moving time off for the organization as a whole. So that people were all not feeling that they needed to respond to their teammates and to their colleagues, that they could really enjoy some longer breaks. They closed over the holidays. Between like Christmas and new years and they closed for that time. They'd never done that before. So that is one organization where we just really have worked together very effectively and they started just prioritizing breaks and prioritizing windows for deep work. I've had other organizations where we've really talked about benefits and policies.

I encourage, and this isn't always something that organizations will do. I've encouraged subsidies and I've encouraged organizations to create tiers for the subsidies. So it can be straight up subsidy for childcare and elder care, which I recommend to the extent that they can afford it. To make that as generous as possible, or to tear it in such a way that people with the lowest salaries receive the highest subsidy. And people who are, people who are in their C-suite and leadership ranks and do not need a subsidy you do not receive one, or they receive a very small one. And just removing some of the burden of the cost of childcare and elder care for caregivers. So I encourage employers if they wanted to do something across the board, have a hardship subsidy, again, tiered in such a way that people with the lowest salaries received the most that addresses some of the added household expenses that people are incurring working from home. And I explain to employers when they pushed back on that, I'm like, listen, are you flying people all over the place right now? No, you're not. Are you paying for office lunches and office parties and office dinners? No, you're not. Like you have money that you have saved as a result of this situation.

And now as more organizations are starting to return to office, or whether it's hybrid, fully remote, encouraging that they take an equity lens to that return. Like I had one client who said, my greatest fear is that all the people who returned to the office are white and not parents. And I'm like, yes, you should be concerned about that. So let's talk about that. Because we know that primary caregivers, particularly mothers are more likely to want the flexibility. And I explained to employers that everyone in my national study actually even my employer side, even all my employees studies no one wants to return to the office. Full-time like practically no one.

So there is that contingent. But I will say that parents and caregivers overwhelming want the flexibility of being able to work from home. They want to save time for the commute. They want to enjoy more family time. They want to have lunch with their family in the middle of the day. They want to be able to take a walk in the middle of the day, throw in a load of laundry in the middle of the day, but it provides so much possibility to make a demanding career fit in with care responsibilities of children in a household or even if you have elder care or adult care.

I encourage managers and leaders that start the one-on-one with, how are you doing? Don't jump into business. Like, how are you doing? And give people a safe space to express themselves. When I was a manager, I told people, hey, if you want to tell me what's going on maybe I can help. Or if you just want a sounding board, listen to people and then ask them, would you like to seek resources within the company? Would you like me to involve HR to see if you can get some added support or help? Sometimes people will say yes, please, thank you so much. Other times people will say, I'm not ready for that yet. I really just wanted you to know that this was going on in my life, but I'm not ready to involve HR. And then I would say, no problem. I'm here for you. I'm here for you. And let's keep having this, keep this conversation open for when you do need more support. So managers display, concern, and love and compassion for people in ways that do not cost anything, but have an incredible impact on people's mood.

And those four pillars that really surfaced from the research, psychological safety being the first, creating workplace flexibility, being the second and flexibility with a capital F being able to curate pay for and subsidized care benefits, childcare, and elder care, and then being able to curate subsidize and de-stigmatize mental health care, right? Those four pillars they came up in the data. They're all like widely, I think, known and accepted ways of supporting people and supporting people in the workplace. But doing it, to your point. Awareness is step one, but then actually taking that next step and implementing that in the culture and changing people's habits and teaching a manager, how to rewrite a performance review, how to re-write key performance indicators, how to handle sending things with schedule send and not sending emails at eight or nine or 10 o'clock at night, how to teach people to not schedule meetings during lunch, especially when they know that schools are closed and everyone has their children at home. How to teach people not to schedule meetings at eight o'clock in the morning when, two-thirds of the team have children under the age of 10. Like nobody wants to be in a meeting at eight o'clock in the morning, especially if they have kids. Allowing people to create these same practices. I have to really walk organizations through it. Because no one was trained to work in this way. And frankly people are not encouraged to deconstruct how work is communicated and assigned and valued and rewarded. People are often celebrated for certain types of measures and certain types of end results. But the how we get there is so subjective. That it requires some re tooling and retraining. Especially in light of something like a pandemic.

Is to recognize that leaders need to be able to navigate the human condition. That is part of leadership. And when I meet leaders and organizations who think it's extra work or a bother, or they're frustrated by having to navigate people's bereavement leave or parental leave or people's FMLA leave or whatever the circumstances are that changed that worker's availability. It's you know what leadership is about, if you are working with people and you are not working with robots, leadership really is about understanding how to adjust performance criteria and how to adjust your goals and how to adjust what success means based on changing conditions, including the conditions on your team.

You need to have time for deep work. That to do really high quality work as a writer or as a strategist, as a leader, you need to protect some of your mental space and you need to think about your work differently, right? It's not the emails you send or the meetings you attend. It's the ideas that you come up with and your ability to bring those ideas to fruition. Some of that is on your own, but some of that is inspiring others and it takes a lot of energy to do that kind of creative thinking work. So people grind themselves down into dust, work around the clock, busy themselves with emails and meetings, and never have time to think a thought. And that actually doesn't allow you to achieve your excellence in any field. So every field is creative, every field, especially now with the way that the pandemic has changed any industry, right? Every field requires innovative future forward thinking. And to be able to do that, you have to liberate yourself from this very dated model of how work gets done.