

The power of professional authenticity



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As a business owner, I am much more involved with human resources than I used to be as an employee. During the process, I have developed a map of the requirements I seek on people and a type of the corporate culture I am looking to integrate in my organization. One of the values, that is of great significance, is professional authenticity. It might sound irrelevant or insignificant at first, but how I came about to believe in its immense impact comes from a personal experience, which I would like to share with you.

I have a background in cancer care, working as a radiation therapist in the US and Greece. Over the course of my professional career, I took my job extremely seriously and I loved it. My favorite part was the smiles of my patients, their warm hugs and kind words. Those aspects of health care are irreplicable and the fulfillment I felt almost resembles the love and pride a parent feels for her child. As life went on though, my personal needs grew significantly. I got married and moved from Greece to the US for the second time. Most importantly, my husband and I were super happy and excited to welcome two baby boys and have a third child on the way in a matter of a few years. Amid all that, my husband was accepted as an internal medicine resident in another state. This meant that after moving, he would have to work endless hours for the foreseen future. There was a necessary change required to be done. That was me stepping out of the labor force to take care of my family. I started working early in life, so stepping away was not easy. Along the way, I realized I was not alone. A great example was seen last year. Thirty nine percent of women with kids under five in the US left the working force to care for their children (Rapid

Survey/ Stanford, 2022) due to limited resources and lack of affordable childcare.

The years passed and my urge to return to work was growing. In preparation for that, I even completed a graduate degree before my come back. Indeed, when all my three children started school, it was the right time. Filling out job applications felt the most thrilling experience. Sadly, their outcomes were not that exciting. Along the way, I found out no corporation wanted to hire an older professional, who they felt was outdated, despite being overqualified.

Caring for my children turned out to be the biggest barrier I faced as a professional. Again, it felt I was not alone. The motherhood penalty affects wages, promotions, evaluations, and mother's ability to get hired. A survey by law firm Slater & Gordon published on Guardian in 2014 of 500 managers, showed that more than 40% admitted they are generally wary of hiring a woman of childbearing age, while a similar number would be wary of hiring a woman who has already had a child or hiring a mother for a senior role. While the Federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 prohibits discrimination against pregnant women, childbirth or related issues, Bloomberg Law found that over 400 discrimination cases lawsuits were filed in 2021. The stereotypical view that women are expected to stay home and raise their children aligns perfectly with the reality of high-cost childcare but rather contradicts with current societal needs.

Improvements are necessary to reduce disparities. Equal opportunities have significant economic benefits. According to figures released by Standard

and Poor (S&P) and published on the World Economic Forum of 2019, if women participated equally to men in the labor force, the US economy would be 8.7% larger than it is today, the French economy would be 17% larger and the Japanese economy would be 14% larger. Economists now say that in the US, increases in gender parity would also lead to larger returns in financial markets. In the US, the effect of greater equality could spur an expansion of 3.6%. As much attractive as these numbers show, corporations will not hire women on an equal basis, unless mothers have indeed adequate support and resources, when raising a child. Free or affordable childcare is the most important of them. Governments bear lots of responsibility into the opportunities provided to its populations. GDPs are graphed based on policies and the real value of mothers can be shown only when daily barriers can be acknowledged, and organizations adapt to become more flexible.

Can mothers wait until the perfect conditions are created for them to contribute their unparalleled value to this world? The answer is "No" because that might never happen. Mothers' value in workforce needs to be appreciated by them first. Becoming a mother naturally propels women into a leadership role for teaching life skills and raising useful members of future societies. This job requires efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, multitasking, hard work and most importantly empathy. Based on my experience, this skill concentration is scarce. However, even having all the above skills and affordable childcare still aren't enough. Going back to my personal experience, I remember myself seriously lacking self-esteem and confidence after becoming a mother. I felt underqualified and almost guilty I couldn't be fully committed to work, due to my family responsibilities. It took me effort, self-awareness, and my husband's continuous support to realize my unique, authentic self as a mother and a professional at the same time. And I finally made it back to work. While I was enjoying working in health care, I realized that was not enough. Having a larger and better impact to people made me quit the job I struggled so much to secure and venture on my own.

My journey in life taught me that there are no good or bad professionals. What fits to one, does not fit to another. However, we all have a fit somewhere, where we can thrive, if we are authentic and true. Some time ago - Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and youngest female head of government - stepped down. She cited burnout after

showing unparalleled leadership for five and a half years and even giving birth while in office. While the discussion around vulnerability has developed to where it can be seen as a sign of maturity and strength, rather than weakness, many still embrace the stereotype of a strong and masculine leader. However, Mrs. Ardern, along with other male and female leaders, have been developing a new leadership model; one of authenticity, empathy and humanity that lacks a major supply. A model of consistency and truthfulness, that people can follow because they relate.

Professional authenticity is a requirement to build an environment of trust, integrity, and productivity. Mothers and other diverse groups should develop self-awareness, while corporations should create strategies on effective utilization of employees' soft and hard skills. Theseus' paradox raises the question of whether an object is fundamentally the same, if all its components are replaced. Similarly, people change over time based on experiences and life events. While an elderly man has few or no characteristics of the child he once was, he is intrinsically the same person. While a young woman is enthusiastic, a professional mother is a problem solver. While a young man is a tech savvy, an older man is a critical thinker. As long as we stay true and clear about our values, changing even all planks of our personal Theseus's ship, is critical to ourselves and a great asset of an organization that is flexible enough to recognize the value.

Sources:

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