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Harmonizing Work and Family Life: a Relational Approach

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Abstract

The academic literature has studied various ways companies can help their employees reconcile their family and work responsibilities. It has also pointed out the benefits that work-family reconciliation measures have for workers and the companies themselves, such as lower employee turnover, better work climate, and higher job satisfaction.

These benefits are presented to business managers as reasons to implement, maintain, and improve work-life balance measures. Many large companies have adopted such measures in the hope that they will have positive consequences for the functioning of their organization.

However, this approach leaves aside some significant issues that can also be understood as challenges for company managers:

- What happens if an organization does not perceive clear benefits from its work-life balance policies?*
- What happens if, on the other hand, conflicts arise between employees because some benefit from the reconciliation measures and others do not?*
- What happens if a company, due to its size or circumstances, lacks the economic or organizational resources to implement work-life balance measures?*

To answer such questions, it is necessary to focus not so much on the "how" but on the "why" companies help their employees to make their work and family life compatible.

I would like to present the idea that, besides the benefits, companies should consider other relevant reasons to promote work-life balance measures.

These other reasons should respond to the challenges I have just mentioned, i.e., that companies should facilitate the harmonization of work and family life for their employees,

- even if they do not perceive clear benefits,*

- even if such measures generate a certain level of conflict between employees, and
- even if the company does not have adequate resources to carry them out.

My starting point is this: the main reason for implementing work-life balance measures is not that they are good for the company but that they are good (even necessary) for families and society.

In the following, I will argue why the company should use its resources to benefit third parties without receiving a clear and specific benefit for itself in return.

The approach I adopt is that of relational sociology (Donati 2011). This approach argues that a theory of the social should focus on social relations, understood as realities that arise from the reciprocal action between individual or collective subjects. Once constituted, social relations condition the successive courses of action of those subjects and, therefore, become the context (structural and, at the same time, symbolic) of such subjects' behavior.

The various relationships influence their subjects in different and specific ways. Every relationship has, in the first place, distinctive goals, aims, or objectives to which the reciprocal action of those who participate in it is oriented. Secondly, in every relationship, means and resources are used that are considered adequate and acceptable to achieve the proposed goals. Thirdly, in every relationship, there are certain norms, formal or informal rules, and more or less stable mutual expectations between the subjects. Finally, in every relationship, there are values or criteria that legitimize its goals, means, and norms.

Social relations generate relational goods or evils according to the type of reciprocal action that takes place between the subjects. Relational goods are those goods that only arise if they are generated and regenerated jointly by those who participate in them. In other words, they are goods that can only be produced and enjoyed in relation to others. For example, friendship is a good that cannot be bought or sold; it can only arise in a relationship between people, that is, from a reciprocal interaction according to certain norms, goals, means, and values (and not others). Friendship requires certain types of behavior and motives, and excludes others. Otherwise, it is not friendship; it is another type of relationship. Something analogous can be said of family love, the school climate of learning, voluntary commitment in an organization, etc. These are goods that arise (to a greater or lesser extent) from a specific type of reciprocal action between social subjects.

Social relationships can also generate relational ills or problems. On the one hand, social relations can create forms of domination. In this case,

the subjects find themselves trapped inside networks that suffocate, restrict their action projects, and impede their flourishing as human beings. On the other hand, when relationships are broken, weakened, or distorted, loneliness, isolation, or self-referentiality arise.

Full Paper awaiting publication