

# What to Expect When Your Employee is Expecting

Five guiding principles for supporting employees before, during and after the arrival of a child

» BY JASON FLEMING, CHRL

**I**n the era of free workplace lunches, nap rooms and unlimited vacation, it is hard to believe that employers still mishandle maternity and parental leave. Yet despite organizations being great places to work when it comes to the little things, many place unnecessary stress on new parents by failing to offer the proper support and accommodation when they need compassion and empathy the most.

Here are some guiding principles:

## **1** GOOD COMMUNICATION

Becoming a parent can be a physically and emotionally draining experience for both men and women. Maintaining regular and open communication is critical.

### **Before a parental leave:**

- Regularly check in with the employee to ensure the lines of communication are open; things can change quickly and dramatically with a pregnancy.
- Restrict the news of the pregnancy to those who must know; let the expectant parent tell everyone else.
- Make a plan for communicating during his or her leave. Remember that work may not be a priority, so these check-ins need not be frequent.

### **During a parental leave:**

- Enact the plan you made together. Occasionally, check in to see if this plan is still appropriate.
- Unless otherwise advised, share important updates, invites to social events and be available to answer any questions. Employees on a leave can begin to feel anxious about their return to work. Keeping them in the loop and reminding them that they are still an important part of the team can help reduce this anxiety.
- Shortly before a new parent returns, it can be helpful to book planning calls to ensure the transition is seamless.

### **After a parental leave:**

- Developing a plan for returning to work that factors in logistical challenges,

reduced energy levels and child-care requirements can help make the transition less stressful for employees.

- For the first few months, have weekly or biweekly check-in meetings to ensure that things are going smoothly.
- Keep in mind that new parents will have new priorities; follow the plan but be flexible and reasonable as they reintegrate into work.

## **2** WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT FOR EMPLOYEES WHO ARE PREGNANT

No two pregnancies are the same. Some women are nearly crippled with nausea and vomiting and cannot work even an hour a day, whereas other women experience heightened focus and energy levels. Be prepared for all scenarios, including ones where a pregnant employee is on medical

leave for the majority of her pregnancy. Having contingency plans for these situations can help alleviate pressure on the employee, her manager and the organization. For example, if a pregnant employee is the only person trained on a certain task, don't wait until a week before their leave starts to begin cross-training; be proactive.

Providing 14-month or 16-month parental leave contracts, instead of the traditional 12-month, can also alleviate pressure by allowing for extra time for knowledge sharing prior to the leave and reintegration into the workplace afterward.

### 3 GET CREATIVE WITH BENEFITS

Not every company can afford to "top up" salaries, but there are many other ways to offer impactful benefits. Some examples of valuable, yet cost-effective, benefits include: one to two weeks of paid time off before a pregnant employee's due date; one to two weeks of full-time pay for part-time work when an employee returns from their leave; and credits for home cleaning or food delivery services. These benefits are not costly but can significantly reduce stress levels and help communicate the company's appreciation and support for their employees.

### 4 LIVE YOUR VALUES, EVEN WHEN IT IS HARD

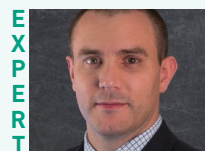
Many organizations include "putting their people first" either officially or unofficially in their mission statement. It is easy to live these values when employees are diligent at work, rarely sick and shuffle their personal commitments around to meet the needs of the organization. However, the true test of the employer's commitment to values comes when employees are unable to perform to their full

capacity. Turning a challenging pregnancy or difficult adjustment period into an opportunity to demonstrate compassion, respect and appreciation proves that the organization's values aren't just words posted on the walls but are ingrained in its DNA.

### 5 MAKE ACCOMMODATION A PRIORITY

Although this may seem obvious, accommodation is regularly mishandled across the country — often by organizations with multi-million-dollar HR budgets. Even forward-thinking employers sometimes allow operational pressures, short-term thinking and/or antiquated attitudes towards parenthood to influence their judgement. It is advisable to take your time when assessing accommodation requests and seek advice when you are unsure how to respond. It is also helpful to keep an open mind and explore creative and flexible strategies to meet employees' requests, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to accommodation.

Canada offers one of the best federal parental leave programs in the world. This is a source of pride for many Canadians. But it is important for employers to remember that the responsibilities don't stop at the federal policy level. Employers play an equally important role. **W**



*Jason is an HR executive with a decade of HR experience. He possesses a BA from the University of Guelph and certificates in HR Management and HR Law as well as the CHRL designation from the HRP. In 2017, Jason was recognized as one of the top 25 HR professionals in Canada by Canadian HR Reporter.*

Photo courtesy of Dean Pellemien

## COACHING CASE STUDY

# Why "Leaving Your Baggage at the Door" isn't Always the Best Workplace Policy

*Whether you're an employee or a boss, here's what you need to know about dealing with personal problems at work*

» BY LISA SANSON, MAPP

**D**avid was having a hard time. Within months of starting a new promotion, his wife told him that she was leaving him. It was an emotional blow he hadn't seen coming. He had trouble sleeping and eating. His kids kept asking him what was going on and he didn't know how to answer. He felt like he was walking through life in a daze as he struggled to sort out how he felt, now that his wife had dropped this bomb on him.