



Note: Happily, the President made this reference to Work Sharing in his Inaugural Address: *"It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours."*

The year is young and we are already hearing a familiar plea: "How do we persuade our managers to support more flexibility?" The assumption is that there must be a way to modify unsupportive attitudes. It helps when the company has a business-beneficial approach and supportive leaders. But in the end, manager skepticism needs to be tackled head-on.

Many flex advocates believe that the primary need of managers is education about the value of different ways of working. In this view, business managers need, above all, to understand the business case. Perhaps their doubts will fade if they see flexibility as an incomparable:

- employee satisfier, engager, retainer and recruiter;
- low or no-cost benefit or reward
- way to rethink work and improve customer service

This business case is framed and delivered, case studies are highlighted and processes are layered on. Some managers nod. But many remain skeptical and don't seem to sign up for really integrating flex into their operations.

Why this disconnect? Do we lack adequate sales skills? Is our message inadequate? Or is there a more basic dilemma? Perhaps the champions' largely positive view of flexibility blinds us to the more deep-seated negativity of those who will have to make it work. To the skeptical or resistant manager, flexibility is more likely to appear as:

- a system of organized absence - a form of corporate AWOL
- a time-consuming distraction, hurting customers and burdening coworkers
- an approach of "no-hands on deck" during times of crisis and long hours

How do these perceptions create barriers to a more flexible workplace?

Flex = organized absence Traditional managers see flexible schedules as intensified absence. Part-time multiplies days off; flextime enshrines tardiness; telecommuting celebrates invisibility. To managers who grew up when perfect attendance was rewarded and absence punished, promoting flexibility feels like marketing AWOL in the Marines. Improving employee satisfaction's not worth losing control of schedules. The common cry: *"What if everyone wants to do it?"*

Flex = loose ends When individuals develop their own schedules, managers fear that they will ignore the impact on others, especially if there is a need for week-to-week or even daily change. Worse, their absence may lead to small and large batches of extra work being dropped on others, including the

manager. To say "no" and limit participants avoids this vexing problem.

Flex = "no hands on deck" Today's managers never know when crisis will strike or a long-hours day will become even longer. The cautious cling to an "all hands on deck" staffing strategy. Predictability and accessibility are high values, and flex is far more of a challenge.

Confronted with these attitudes, what are champions to do? Convincing skeptical managers depends on both good system design and good argument. Here are some thoughts on each:

Organized absence It is very difficult to confront each of these deeply held concerns without live, interactive training. We find that walking managers "across the bridge" from doubt to openness requires informed conversation. That said, in any format, the antidotes to this concern are planning and backfill. Helping managers shift from "eyeball assessment" to clear definition and review of performance goals is vital. And staffing needs to be kept whole through backfill. When headcount blocks filling part-time holes, "absence" becomes absence.

Loose ends Enabling dropped responsibilities is tough for traditional managers. They worry that a workgroup that's been managed top-down may not be able to suddenly direct itself collaboratively. If collective problem solving and shared work assignment don't occur, then the manager becomes firefighter-in-chief. The fear of chaos can best be addressed by training managers in how to nurture and maintain self-managing teams. Doable, but not simple.

"No hands on deck" Skeptical managers are often on the strong control end of the continuum. A useful and prized feature of that control is the ability to summon "all hands on deck." Flexibility threatens this ability on many levels. It is possible to create the necessary responsiveness and contribution virtually. But it takes redesign, negotiation and preparation to make it happen. Training incorporating simulations can be very helpful.

These serious manager reservations are deeply held and require real change. We often wonder whether our institutions commit the time and resources necessary to make the significant changes in attitude and behavior that are required. When we search the society for analogs, this shift toward flexible management seems less a matter for narrow education and more a matter of serious behavioral training. If we want to change several decades of habit, a good deal of work will be required. These are challenges we would enjoy overcoming with you.

Best regards,
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