How to Make the Business Case for Work-Life Balance

The United States is still one of only four countries without a nationwide paid maternity or family leave. (The others are Swaziland, Liberia and Papua New Guinea.)

Since that’s unlikely to change soon, the academy is creating policies to fill the gaps on this and other work-life issues.

A roundtable held at the College and University Work Family Association (CUWFA) conference presented strategies to identify and make the business case for new work-life policies and programs. The conference was held in May 2012 at the University of Michigan.

Facilitators were Carol Hoffman, associate provost and director of work/life at Columbia University; Beth Sullivan, senior associate for advocacy and policy in the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan and Dr. Julie Nutter, associate VP of human resources at DePaul University in Chicago.

Case needs facts, data

 Tight budgets, political scrutiny and a multitude of distractions means a new work-life program won’t get past the gleam-in-the-eye stage without a solid business case filled with hard facts, relevant data, peer comparisons and a list of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The case should also list the direct and indirect costs of proposed solutions as well as the expected return on investment. An effective case will include a timeline and budget plan for executing the proposal.

Facilitators asked participants to consider four questions on the process for introducing new work-life policies at their school, keeping an eye on ROI.

1. How do you identify an important work/life issue at your school? A topic of conversation was about having conversations. You need to hear from others at your school what work-life issues are on peoples’ minds.

2. Try to determine whether it’s a minor or temporary issue or one with real impact on a group of employees.

Since leaders are paid to see the big picture, ask what they see coming down the road. Current work-life trends that should be on their radar are faculty retirements, wellness, child and elder care.

Another topic is dual careers. As gay marriage becomes legal in more states, issues of same sex partners emerge.

Work-life policies are a key tool to retain women of color who come from cultures where they’re the first to be tapped for hands-on care giving and supporting their extended families. Learn what other schools are considering.

Look for “gaps between silos.” Different departments may be working on different aspects of a program. Identify what they’re not doing and how you can fill in the gaps.

2. How do you influence others to see an issue as requiring attention, intervention or resources? Make connections and construct relationships so that you can become familiar with peoples’ challenges. Build on their self-interest. Share your knowledge across the university. What are your peers doing and how’s it working?

3. How do you identify stakeholders and advocates in your school? Find out who else is working on the topic or issue. Identify faculty and key leaders who will champion your cause. At a large school there will be faculty with subject matter expertise and a personal interest in the topic. A faculty women’s group might be a good sounding board.

Men’s interest in care-giving and parenting issues may not have increased available work-life programs, but it has increased usage of what’s already been approved. Leverage their knowledge and interest.

Test the waters with baby steps.

This is not the time to develop and launch a pilot program. You’re still at the data gathering stage. Effective, long-lasting change is achieved in increments.

Gather the thoughts of influencers and those you will need to influence, making sure to get various opinions. Develop partnerships, ensuring that people’s skills and interests are best used.

Identify the data that can support your case. Weave studies from both corporate and academe into your business case.

4. How do you move the idea through your school’s structures to the eventual creation of a new service or program? While there will be many interested parties, determine who absolutely needs to be involved in the decision making, piloting and gaining of approval.

Don’t waste a crisis

Since chance favors the best prepared, be ready, be aware and have all your arguments developed. Keep your information current for when the opportunity presents itself.

Never let a good crisis go to waste. Take advantage of situations that raise the issue. This requires the ability to “read the tea leaves of the political landscape.”

Remember when former Harvard president Larry Summers made his intemperate remarks about women in the academy? Many work-life initiatives came out of his gaffe.

Make the “whole elephant visible.” If a new mother needs an adjusted teaching schedule to allow for nursing, it’s not just about one woman’s life. A new federal law requires workplaces to have time and space for nursing. Act on it.

CUWFA offers a work-life report on making the business case for work-life policies and programs at colleges and universities. It’s downloadable for CUWFA members at www.cuwfa.org/tools-for-practice.

Higher education is at a crossroads on whether to continue its unique model or embrace the corporate one. In this arena, making the business case combines doing what works to improve productivity with doing what’s right. —MLS

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