**SUPERMOM: Teaching Family-Work Conflict in the Classroom with Discussion Based Learning**

**ABSTRACT:**

This classroom discussion experience covers the topic of Family-Work Conflict based on a shared reading of a scenario. The vignette describes the plight of a single working mother faced with a difficult situation surrounding home finances and the needs of her children. This experience design can be applied to undergraduate or graduate students. Through this discussion exercise, the students will approach a human resource problem that they will likely face in the real world (even if unknowingly) and develop options to attempt to attract, support, and keep talented employees despite family work conflict.

**Keywords:**

Family Work Conflict, Work Family Conflict, Human Resources Education

**INTRODUCTION**

The dramatic increase of adoption of remote working during the global quarantine of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed family-work conflict (FWC) as a key human resource (HR) management and education area. Before the pandemic, work-family conflict (WFC) was a cornerstone in the HR classroom. There was a guiding premise to help future managers minimize elements of WFC by establishing family-friendly policies (e.g., maternity, paternity, parental, sick leaves, and health care insurance) in the workplace. However, with more organizations now utilizing remote work, future managers cannot rely on the separation of work and home as was the case for the traditional onsite work environment. The result of this lack of separation has caused highly talented and productive employees to consider leaving the workforce to address dramatic changes in the home environment, such as childcare. Working mothers specifically have been affected the most. Future HR managers must learn how to understand what FWC is (compared to WFC) and create a toolbox of understanding and options to attract, support, and keep talented employees.

This classroom discussion experience is designed for HR or management classroom discussion of the topics of FCW and WFC. It can be delivered in a virtual or in-person environment. We present options for a simple presentation (ideal for undergraduate settings) and an à la carte menu of teaching concepts to be peppered into the classroom experience (utilizing all or additional options allow for appropriateness for graduate courses).

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

**Topic to be Covered**

*Base Elements*

* Family-Work Conflict (FWC; Greenhaus & Beutell, 2006)
* Work-Family Conflict (WFC; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985)

*Optional Elements*

* Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966)
* Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)
* Decision Theory (Hansson, 1994; MacCrimmon, 1968)
* HR issues associated with employees who have a criminal record

**Learning Objectives**

*Base Elements*

At conclusion of learning experience, students will be able to:

* Understand the difference between WFC and FWC
* Synthesize lecture and experience learning into actions to minimize similar HR situations of FWC.

*Optional Elements*

* Apply decision-making theory to course scenario and sub-plots
* Understand theory of Locus of Control and how it applies to scenario
* Explain the stages of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need and explain issues with theory based upon child vs. adult

*Base Elements*

For undergraduates, many of the students will not have experienced a circumstance similar to the mother in the scenario. (Though there may be some who have relevant lived experience and some students may also have familiarity from relationships with friends and family members who many have experiences similar to the mother in the classroom scenario.) A major strength of the exercise is the opportunity to present a real-world situation that they are likely to face in a future HR position. A discussion experience like this allows for future HR professionals to hear the voices of the employees who are struggling before they are faced with this type of issue in their own future work environment. For graduate students, the plight of the mother in the scenario will likely be more visceral because of lived experience. There are many potential FWC elements which students can grasp onto as part of the discussion which may or may not lead to innovative solutions to the working mother’s problem. Some elements in the scenario do not directly lend to a solution in a traditional cause and effect way. However, this is by design. Some students may personally link to aspects of the scenario based personal experience and add to the discussion in unique ways such as telling a story they witnessed in a similar situation.

This discussion experience allows for students who are likely not exposed to this type of FWC personally to safely and without judgement explore possibilities for managing HR conflicts in FWC before being placed in a situation where they must address the issue without any experience or theoretical backing.

*Optional Elements*

A strength of this discussion experience is that an instructor can choose how many of the elements they wish to present. An instructor can choose to use decision theory to lead toward how to solve a mother’s problems from a managerial perspective. However, an instructor can also choose to omit decision making theory completely to solely study family FWC and its raw form. If locus of control is something that the instructor does not see value in, they do not need to include it and the experience will still work. The same is true with all elements other than FWC which is the central theme. Below we will present some theoretical foundations and considerations to including these elements.

In the realm of psychology, locus of control is extremely well researched and can be applicable to the discussion scenario easily. However, the instructor should make certain to delineate strongly between the concept of locus of control and attributional style (a concept linked with explanations for past outcomes).

Decision Theory can be an ideal way for problem solving through difficult HR conflicts. Often people who are making decisions are limited in resources (e.g., time, energy, and cognitive awareness of options) and struggle with the difficulty of determining the best course of action. Additionally, people in continual conflict tend to use heuristic thinking (decision-making based on unjustified or routine experience) and are more likely to succumb to fallacies or inaccuracies in options (Johnson & Payne, 1985). Using Decision Theory, we can give some order to the seemingly order-less HR situations presented in FWC.

Despite Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs being an essential part of psychology studies, there are many academics who argue against the theory in real world applications (e.g., Abulof, 2017; Mittelman, 1991; Tay & Diener, 2011). This is not a weakness of this approach but rather a strength. As an instructor, we can present one or more of the theories in opposition to the hierarchy of needs and we present the same questions to the students considering new theory. Not only are students capable of critically analyzing the effectiveness, usability, and merit of this theory but they are also able to critically discuss when new information is provided.

When this class experience was first introduced, it was done for a group of female prisoners within one year of release from there incarceration. Considering that 58% of all incarcerated women have one or more child under the age of 18 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), this classroom experience had a much more profound meaning to the participants. Consider sharing this population with the students after they have completed the exercise. A different discussion likely can come out of this for the students.

**EXERCISE (FOR ACTUAL PRESENTATION TO STUDENTS)**

**Material, Space, and other Requirements**

* Classroom space for meeting or virtual medium such as zoom.
* Lecture Slides
  + Internet access
  + Powerpoint presentation software and hardware

**Readings** (if the instructor chooses to give prior study of topics before classroom experience)

* Based upon Theoretical Foundations list

**Time Requirements**

* 1 hour class period
  + 30-45 minutes lecture
  + 15-30 minutes workshop with classmates

**In Class Activity**

* Lecture
  + Utilize slides to communicate topics
  + *Base Elements*
    - What is WFC compared to FWC?
    - Where is the HR manager’s line (legal, ethical, or other) in managing FWC?
  + *Optional Elements*
    - What is Locus of Control and how does it apply to topic?
    - What is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and how does it apply to topic?
    - Decision making process and how does it apply to topic
* Classroom Experience
  + Share scenario (See Appendix I for details of what will be discussed)
    - Break into small group
      * Discuss the conflict and possible “solutions”
      * Answer pre-set questions to be presented in the group discussion
* **Debrief** 
  + Large Group
    - Discuss the question answers from the break-out groups
    - Discuss how HR professionals can address the problems of FWC in the future

**SESSION DESCRIPTION (FOR THE MOBTS PRESENTATION)**

During the conference, we will initially present a few simple slides that cover the overall classroom problem as outlined in the introduction of this submission. We will then present the topics of WFC compared to FWC as though it was being presented to students in a truncated form. Additionally, we will present locus of control, the basics of decision-making theory, and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs before presenting the exercise to the participants. Considering that the audience for this presentation likely already knows these topics, we will only highlight points that are key to teaching the topic or that can be helpful in the discussion after the exercise. The time expectations for this part of the presentation should take no longer than 10 minutes.

The participants will be broken into groups via the zoom rooms for discussion, similar to a live classroom (virtual or in-person). Each participant will be given via a PDF file the details of the situational conflict for discussion. The breakout rooms will reassign through and discuss the conflict and develop group answers on ways to address the conflict. We expect this to take approximately 30 minutes.

At the end of the break-out room discussions or 30 minutes (whichever comes first), we will bring the groups back together for a larger discussion to report how each group suggested ways to navigate the conflict. We will then allow for 10 minutes of overall discussion based on the given questions and additional ones that came up during the break-out rooms. We will then offer the initial scenario where the course was taught - a women’s prison to women within one year of incarceration. We will then pose the simple question: knowing how this was initially taught, how would you expect students to change their responses knowing that the mother was also a felon that was experiencing the FWC?

We will allow for a small amount of time for questions after the presentation for suggestions for improvement or other ways the exercise could impact students.

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**APPENDIX I**

**Scenario**

**Single mom - mid 30’s**

**Two children (12 year old male, 3 year old female)**

* + Both have different fathers
  + Boy
    - Grandparents trying to be actively involved
    - Father not paying any aspect of child support or involved
  + Girl
    - Father sees her every other weekend and pays the state minimum of child support.
    - Grandparents do not live close

**Part-time $10/hr job**

* + No benefits.
  + No real opportunities for growth with the company
  + Working hours 9-3 (no weekends)

**Support System**

* **Mother**
  + Reliable for childcare about 70% of the time if asked
  + Frequently comments about what her daughter does “wrong” in her parenting decisions
* **State Assistance** 
  + Fixed amount for housing
  + Food assistance
  + Medical insurance

**Values:**

* Wants better life for her kids than had
* Hard worker

**Problem:**

* **Expenses for rent, utilities, and transportation to and from work are covered by what she earns in her part-time job and state assistance, but her son asking for new shoes for the basketball team.**
* **She knows that if she buys anything in excess of her maintenance lifestyle, she will get behind in her bills, have a really hard time making up the deficit, or have to borrow money.**

**As an HR representative, please assess the following:**

* What in this situation does she have control of within her values?
* How can we as an HR manager support, provide understanding, or do anything for this working mother?
* How can she be a “super mom?”

**APPENDIX II**

**Optional Questions based on inclusion of Optional Theory Elements:**

**Locus of Control**

* How would the mother make decisions differently if her locus of control were internal?
* How would the mother make decisions differently if her locus of control were external?
* Considering that she is likely to apply attributional style, how can we advise properly as HR professionals?

**Decision Theory**

* How can we use decision theory to help the mother process through the problem?
* What part of the decision-making process is not uncertain?

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

* Is the son’s request a need or a want?
* Why is mom the one he is asking for the shoes?
* How can Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs be applied to other FWC situations?
* Is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs relevant in this scenario? If not why?

**Employing People with a Criminal Record**

* How would the students perceive presenting this same experience to incarcerated women?
* How would the discussions differ from the ones had in class?
* How should that inform their decisions as future human resource professionals knowing that they will likely employ one of these women in near future?