

# SMALL Business Times

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## A sense of community

The workplace need not be a 'family'

### Question:

**At a roundtable meeting I attended recently, we were told that the workplace needs to become more like home for employees. They're so busy, they don't have time to form meaningful relationships. Excuse me, but who's the genius behind the idea that people who work together should be like family? I've seen way too many messed-up families and the dysfunctional people they produce to know this idea misses the mark in a big way. What do you think?**

### Answer:

I disagree with the idea that work should become home and that co-workers should become family. Home issues are not the same as work issues. The dynamics of a family system are not the same as an organizational system. Different ends are sought. Different methods are used. Different criteria are attached.

Let me also observe that I'm not surprised you came upon this topic at your roundtable. The issue of life-work balance is increasingly visible these days. I'm seeing the topic discussed more frequently in the journals that come across my desk. For example, *T&D* recently had a feature story on this issue.

Of course, this is a reflection of our hurried, harried lives. Work is hard to escape from these days. We work long hours and then go home and do it all over again. Technological advances (e.g., cell phones, laptop computers, the Internet, etc.) allow us to tap into the workplace from home. In fact, if we want to, we can work 24-7.

Many of us, of course, are concerned by this trend. What is the impact on the quality of life? How does all of this work impact our home lives? What can be done to address this matter?

Interestingly, when researchers examine

what influences workplace morale and job satisfaction, soft issues such as co-worker relationships, camaraderie, etc. tend to be high on the list. In other words, employees tend to value being treated like people, not machines.

So, creating a supportive, warm work environment helps employees feel satisfied. Does this mean that work settings with high satisfaction levels have become like home to the people who work there? Does this mean that employees who are satisfied view their employers as family?

Frankly, your question touches on a complex issue. You mention family. Just what is meant by the term "family?" This is a question that is being debated across American society today.

Historically, family has meant adults (typically, parents) and children who live together as a unit. Of course, this simple definition has never captured the reality of family life, though. There have always been extended families, single-parent families, etc. Today, as we all know, families are increasingly diverse. As a result, it is difficult to generate one neat, tidy definition that encompasses all of the variations.

Looking at the composition of our workforce, we see increasing diversity, too. In greater numbers, women and minorities are occupying visible and responsible work roles. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has addressed personal or private issues so as to ensure workplace equity for those who are affected.

My point in raising this issue of increasing diversity, whether it is at home or at work, is to suggest that, at the core of things, we need to understand and appreciate each other. An accurate understanding of self and others is the basis for rich, meaningful relationships, whether they are personal or professional.

By understanding each other at home, we create deep, emotional bonds and an environment of love. By understanding each other at work, we build trust and rapport and an environment of collaboration.

I am suggesting, therefore, that it is highly desirable to recognize that each of us has a life involving both home and work. That is the critical issue underlying your question, at least from my way of looking at it.

And it leads me to make a bold statement. I believe we should strive to create community within the workplace.

Before we get caught up in semantics, let me tell you what I mean by community. I mean the forging of a common identity or purpose. To build community, employees within a company must recognize that they each:

- Are there for the same overriding reason (i.e., to help the company fulfill its mission).
- Bring unique talents, methods and personal styles to that pursuit.
- Benefit from reciprocal, collaborative exchanges with one another.
- Deserve to be treated with fairness, courtesy and respect.
- Profit from jobs and tasks that are challenging and require the fullest use of their attributes.
- Thrive in environments where they are seen as whole persons, rather than as merely that person who does that job.

It was Archilochus who wrote, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

Building community in the workplace is a big thing. From my perspective, I believe it is a big thing worth pursuing. How about you?



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