Dawn Needs to Firm Up Her Group's Flextime Options

Most people at Mega had a hard time concentrating the Monday after the Super Bowl. There was an eerie quietness in the lobby when I walked in, and as I walked to my desk the silence in the hallways was quite deafening. Having watched the game myself, I knew the malaise was a direct result of the Bears heart-breaking defeat to the Dolphins on a last-second field goal. The Bears scored the go-ahead touchdown with only a minute left, but a great kickoff return lead to good field position for the Dolphins, and they completed two passes before making a 53-yard field goal to end the game.

Logging into my e-mail, I noticed that my 9 a.m. meeting with Evan Gillespie had been cancelled. At 9:35, I began to wonder if Dawn Jackson was going to show up for our 9:30 meeting. As I dug through my drawer for a company directory to give Dawn a call, she showed up.

"Sorry I am late, Tom. We had a few people show up late this morning for work, and another woman called in sick, so we've been scrambling to cover for everyone."

"I guess last night's loss has really got people in a funk," I said with a smile.

"Well, I wish I could say this sort of behavior from our group was atypical. Unfortunately, it is not. In fact, that is why I scheduled this meeting."

Dawn was fairly new to Mega, but I had heard from several people that she was a competent manager who was fair and flexible. She worked in Accounts Receivable and was responsible for a team of eight women and three men. She brushed back her brown hair as she started explaining the specifics of her situation.

"When I first started at Mega, I spoke to the team about expectations and what we needed to work on as a department. One of the big concerns from the group was the ability to balance professional and personal commitments. I know everyone has a private life. In fact, everyone but three people in the department is married. In addition, half of the people in the department have more than two kids."

"That's interesting," I said. "It sounds like scheduling is a big concern for your people."

"Exactly," she responded, straightening up as if she wanted to jump right into that topic. "To accommodate their needs, I decided to implement flextime for our department. This allows Peter and Julie to come in early and leave early, for example, while Sara and Jennifer come in an hour late and stay an hour late."

"Sounds good so far. So what is the problem?"

"Honestly, I am just having a hard time managing it. Sometimes we don't have the right people in the office to deal with customer calls, and there have been many times when employees do not stick to the flexed schedules we arranged."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't wish to name names, but suffice it to say that the employees seem to think as long as they work eight hours each day they can come and go as they please. As a result, the employees who have been allowed to work from 7 a.m. – 4 p.m. with an hour

lunch will sometimes work those hours, but they'll also sometimes work 8-5 or 9-5 without taking lunch."

"I see. Well, that is definitely a problem Dawn. I think you and your employees are confusing flextime with free time. The flexible part of flextime is allowing your employees to work off normal office hours. However, once they have established the hours they are going to work, they need to adhere to those hours."

Lesson #9 – Ensure Flextime is Good for the Business as Well as the Individual

Flextime is a work concept that is becoming increasingly more popular. It is not necessarily new, however. Some companies have been doing it for years. If you let a person come in early and leave early for a doctor's appointment or a child's game, you are employing a basic form of flextime.

Generally speaking, flextime refers to the ability of people to work the number of weekly hours the company expects, but gives them flexibility on when the hours are worked. Usually people are given flexibility within some general boundaries. For instance, your company may set general hours of work to be 6 a.m. until 7 p.m. During this 13-hour period, everyone is expected to be on-the-job for nine hours, which includes eight hours of work and one hour of lunch. Flextime would occur within this general 13-hour window.

There are many variations, but the following examples illustrate the point.

- An employee works better in the morning and prefers to work from 7 a.m. until 4 p.m. each day.

- You live in a city with bad commuting traffic. A number of people work from 6 a.m. until 3 p.m. and a number of other people work 10 a.m. until 7 p.m. to get in before or after the morning and afternoon rush hours.

- You have a mother that needs to carpool a group of children to school once per week. She normally comes in at 8:30 a.m. every day, except on Thursday. On Thursday, she comes in an hour late since it is her turn to carpool and she works an hour later that day.

- Your company allows people to work four 10-hour days (actually they are in the office eleven hours, including lunch) and take a three-day weekend.

All of these are examples of flextime. Your company or your organization is giving people more control over their lives and their schedules by allowing a level of flexibility regarding when people are physically in the office. Note that this is not the same as teleworking, since the people who utilize flextime are actually in the office.

Flextime is based on letting employees have some level of control over their schedules. Many people work non-standard scheduled but are not working flextime. For instance, you may have a customer service organization that needs to be available from 8 a.m. through 9 p.m. The company will need to set the work hours to make sure there is coverage in the morning and at night. This is not an example of flextime since the company sets the hours, not the employee.

Flextime provides intangible benefits to a company. People are generally happier when they have more control over their lives, which leads to better morale, and should translate into better employee retention. Likewise, happy employees are generally more productive employees. If the company is getting the regular number of hours it expects, the situation can be a win-win for everyone.

Why then is Dawn uncomfortable about the way flextime is working in her group? Because she is not proactively managing the flextime program and she is not controlling it to make sure the business needs are being met. Remember the prior comment that flextime can be a win-win for both the company and the employee? In fact, it has to be that way. If either the company or the individual is in a perceived "lose" situation, the program will not be successful.

The following questions must be taken into account in a flextime program:

- **Can the job be performed using flextime, or are there limits on the flextime parameters?** This is the first question to ask. Some jobs can be done at any time. For instance, if you are an IT programmer, you may be able to sit at your desk and bang out code at almost any given time of the day. However, if you are in a job like customer service, you will probably need to be working at the time when customers are likely to call. In Dawn's case, they provide basic customer support from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m. Since they have 10 hours to cover, she does have the ability to work with people on flexible hours. If some people prefer to work 7 a.m. until 3 p.m. (with no lunch), while others prefer to work 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., she can definitely attempt to accommodate them.

- **Are the business needs covered?** The question here is whether you can accommodate flextime requests from all employees and still meet your business commitments and expectations. Sometimes you can and sometimes you can't. This is the first area that Dawn needs to address. She has allowed flextime in her group, but it sounds like she is not meeting her business expectations. If she had an equal number of people working early and working late, she would have been fine. However, it sounds like too many people are arbitrarily working later, which is resulting in not having adequate coverage in the morning.

- **Are flextime hours stable or ad-hoc?** Flextime should not imply that employee's hours are ad-hoc and that people come in on any given day whenever they want. Flextime just allows an employee to reset his or her schedule. Once an employee asks for and receives approval for flexible hours, those hours must be adhered to. In other words, the flexible hours now become the schedule the employee is expected to meet. For example, if you have an employee that receives permission to work 7 a.m. until 4 p.m., the employee must be in by 7 a.m. each day. He or she cannot come in late and leave late on a regular basis. The employee needs to meet his or her commitment to the flexed schedule to keep the entire department running smoothly.

  Dawn also has a problem in this area. It sounds like she is not sure when some of her people will be working on any given day because she has not held them accountable. This is unacceptable.

- **Are people meeting their commitments and expectations?** Flextime does not work for everyone. Some people work better with more structure and discipline. These are the people that say they want to come in early to beat traffic, and then they consistently come in late because they have a hard time getting up in the morning. Some people say they want to leave late but then they start failing to meet their commitments because they have a hard time focusing late in the day. In these examples flextime may be contributing (or be the cause of) a performance problem.

Dawn has got a mess on her hands now, but she can take steps to remedy the situation. Using the four questions from the previous page, Dawn should quickly put together a plan like the following:

1. Make sure all jobs in her department are eligible for flextime. It may turn out that they are, but she may discover that some jobs require people to work a "standard" business day. She should document her findings to make sure they are fact-based and can withstand a challenge from the affected people.

2. Determine the coverage she needs from a business perspective. Right now her group is not supporting the business needs adequately because they are not adhering to their flex schedule. For her group, this will probably mean more people will need to be available in the morning. If she explains the coverage problem first and then asks the group for help, she may well find that some people will be fine with moving to the earlier start time. If she cannot find the coverage she needs, she can look for people to cover the earlier start time in shifts. If this still causes problems, she may be able to require some people to work early based on some standard criteria like seniority. Flextime needs to be a win for the employees and a win for the company. If the business needs cannot be met, flextime cannot be allowed either.

3. Assuming she can get her business needs covered, the next step is to formalize and document everyone's work hours. It may be fine for an employee to work 10 a.m. until 7 p.m. However, the employee needs to be accountable and responsible to work those hours. They cannot come in early and leave early or come in late and leave late. Once the flextime schedule is set, Dawn is counting on each employee to be in when they are supposed to be. Dawn needs to stress this point with her staff. If an employee cannot be responsible for working the hours he or she committed to, there is a potential performance problem.

4. Lastly, Dawn needs to be sure that all employees are meeting their performance expectations. For example, each employee must provide superior customer support regardless of whether a person is working flextime or not. If people are not meeting expectations, they should be dealt with through a performance management process.

Dawn should go back to her team and regroup on the flextime. She will then be in a much more comfortable position managing it and controlling it.