1 Workplace Culture and Parental Leave Policy

Despite the fact that the majority of women work for pay, they remain the primary caregivers for their young children and, increasingly, for their elderly parents. The dramatic rise in women's employment over the past few decades has motivated private employers to develop "family-friendly" policies that are aimed at attracting and retaining female workers. Among these policies is parental leave. It is a social policy that recognizes that women cannot maintain a linear work pattern without some provision for interruptions. Women have babies; not all women, but a majority of those of childbearing age. They need some flexibility in their paid work schedules to allow for predictable time periods for pregnancy, childbearing, lactation, and child-caring. It is simply the cost of doing business. Employers that understand this reality often learned the hard way, as problems arose with employee turnover, morale, increased absenteeism, and reduced productivity.

Parental leave is not a female-only policy; it is a policy aimed at increasing father involvement and thus equalizing child care responsibilities in two-parent families. In fact, feminist scholars and activists have been calling for universal parental leave policies for many years. After a groundswell of grassroots pressure and much congressional debate, President Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in August 1993.

This bill includes a mandate to employers to provide a twelve-week leave to women *and* men to parent a newly

arrived baby.[1] This applies to employers with fifty or more employees within a seventy-five-mile radius of the workplace, and eligible employees must have worked for their employer for one year or at least 1,250 hours within the year (U.S. Dept. of Labor 1993; National Report on Work and Family 1995). As the first bill signed into law by the president, this gender-neutral legislation was heralded by the Clinton Administration as a major step forward for working families. And that it was, despite the fact that the final legislation was a watered-down version of the original proposal.

But the passage of a federal law, and a bevy of private sector initiatives, have not altered the fact that women remain the primary users of parental leave policies. And even among women, parental leave is underutilized. Why has the intent of the new law remained largely unfulfilled? And what can be done about it?

This book provides a case study of a large financial services corporation, which I call Premium, Inc.,[2] focusing on how its workplace culture affects attitudes toward the company's parental leave policy and those who use it. In investigating workplace culture, I looked at the crossroads of two phenomena: the proliferation of family-friendly policies in corporations that seek to retain women workers, and the corporate imperative to maintain a profit. These two phenomena are deeply intertwined.

In fact, parental leave is one piece of a progressive long-term vision for family policy. As a "time policy," parental leave clashes with the powerful norms that reinforce the notion that workers must work long and hard in corporate America. While legally Americans have an eight-hour day, millions of workers—including those at Premium—are putting in twelve- and fourteen-hour days, and this has in-

creasingly become the social norm. Taking time away from the job has become risky in an era of downsizing, when people fear for their jobs and their futures. Taking time away for parenting—a job that is devalued in our culture—can be even more threatening in some companies and for some employees. Rather than "taking time" for oneself or one's family, it may be perceived as "taking time away" from the company and, in particular, from the company's productivity. The extent to which a company's workplace culture supports "taking time" affects women's and men's experiences as new parents.

This book reveals what life is like inside Premium, Inc., for those who choose to take a parenting leave and for those who do not. It looks at how employees conceptualize the meaning of their work, including the nature of the work itself, the pressures they experience to perform or produce, the feelings of connectedness they have with their co-workers, and the extent to which they feel secure in their jobs. All of these factors affect new parents' attitudes toward taking a leave or, for their supervisors, granting a parental leave beyond the three months allowed by the FMLA.

In fact, corporate, or workplace, culture is extremely complex. While a company undoubtedly has a universal culture that affects all employees, different departments form subcultures as well. Within a particular department, subcultures may also exist, defined by an employee's job responsibilities, intellectual and personal interests, and lifestyle. I spoke with three women managers who regularly met for lunch to talk in private about problems with their jobs and their department. A closeted lesbian spoke to me about her circle of friends, all of whom were not "out" on the job. A group of middle-management men met every day to play cards during their lunch hour.

Likewise, for those women who used the parental leave policy, a special subculture existed. They had a lot in common, and they often sought the support of others who had children and who had used the leave before them. But this subculture was not without its own potential conflicts. Women managers and nonmanagers were potentially in conflict, given their hierarchical relationship. In fact, there were women managers who had used the leave policy and had to decide whether or not their subordinates could take longer than the FMLA-protected twelve-week leave. In addition to needing authorization for length of leave, nonmanagers must get their manager's approval to return part-time. At times, even the special subculture among those at the same occupational level was threatened, when, for example, a manager approved part-time work for one leave-taker, and denied it for another.

Workplace culture—in all of its complexity—frames most of what goes on within the corporation. Whether or not new parents use the parental leave policy depends on a range of critical factors, including their gender as well as their occupational status. I found that neither women nor men at the upper management levels used the leave policy at Premium; and middle-level managers used it sparingly. In fact, it was female nonmanagers who were the largest cohort of leave-takers, and the amount of leave time they used varied. Some women discovered, after they became pregnant or were approaching their leave time, that their managers were very supportive and would help them make the transition into the leave and back again; other women found that their managers focused only on how soon they were going to return to the job.

Most men facing new parenthood did not even consider ''taking time'' away from their jobs, and if they did consider

it, they worried that their careers might suffer or that their colleagues would be critical. These variations in experience reflect a rich and complex workplace culture.

I chose to study Premium's workplace culture because the company has an array of excellent family policies and is considered in the vanguard of socially responsible and family-friendly corporations. I also surveyed ten additional major companies, all of which belong to a national Work and Family Consortium, to verify whether my findings at Premium were, in fact, more universal. Like Premium, these companies have a range of family-responsive policies. By focusing on so-called "best practice" companies, I gained insights into corporate culture in the best of circumstances, as I explored what workers—both women and men—face as parents on the job.

I spent one year collecting data at Premium—between 1993 and 1994—in two departments, which I call INFO and PRO, representing six hundred employees in a seven-thousand-employee corporation. Over the year, I interviewed forty employees—female and male—representing all levels of the occupational strata, including upper management, middle management, and nonmanagement. Fourteen of these employees—all women—had taken a parental leave between 1992 and 1994. Ten men with young children had not taken a leave. All of the leave-takers I interviewed were members of two-parent, heterosexual families. The large majority of these employees were white, reflecting the composition of the company's labor force. Two of the employees I interviewed were African American, professional nonmanagerial employees, and they were in the minority at their occupational status level. I also interviewed one Asian male professional, an Asian female clerical worker, and a Latina clerical worker. In addition, I in-

terviewed a woman from outside the corporation who had been part of an external organizing drive to pressure Premium to revamp its wage structure for clerical workers and develop family policies.

Through semistructured interviews, I spoke to Premium employees about how they knew about the policy, whether leave-takers were encouraged or supported to use the policy, how non-leave-takers—those who had children and those who did not—reacted when their colleagues took a leave, and what systems, if any, were set up to deal with the work of leave-takers while they were gone. I also spoke to leave-takers about the division of labor in their homes, including how this affected the decision regarding which parent took the leave and how long the leave lasted.

As a participant observer at staff meetings, I sought to understand how employees—males and females at all levels of the hierarchy—related to one another, as well as how issues of family and work were dealt with on a daily basis. I attended meetings in which managers were instructed about the differences between the company policy and the FMLA so they could better respond to requests for leaves. And I attended informal gatherings like coffee hours and Christmas parties. Over the year, I developed informal relationships with two employees whom I met for lunch over a six-month period, as well as Elana—my key informant—with whom I have now met informally for over four years. Our relationship, which began as part of this study, has continued to grow.

In true participant-observer fashion, I sought out venues to just ''hang out,'' a challenging task given that there is very little common space on departmental floors where people can gather at Premium. At different periods, I found an empty desk within a partitioned cubby where I watched and

listened, while reading Premium literature or writing field notes. I also ate at the company cafeteria frequently and sat in the lobby in the one common area for the entire company where employees can relax.

As a feminist sociologist, I consciously observed the ways in which power differentials, based on gender and occupational status, affected day-to-day decisions and activities related to leave-taking. As an organizational analyst, I observed the structures that created, maintained, and reinforced certain norms and values within the corporation, which ultimately affected leave-taking. And finally, as a policy analyst, I considered the broader economic and social policies needed to meet the intended goals of a gender-neutral parental leave policy. This book offers a critical analysis of the role workplace culture plays regarding attitudes toward parental leave and those who use it.

Welcome to Premium, Inc.

Premium, Inc., is a highly respected financial services corporation with over seven thousand employees at its ''corporate headquarters,'' two-thirds of whom are women. Rising above the urban skyline, this nationally renowned corporation has an awesome physical presence. It is large and sprawling, with one main tower and a spread of older buildings that create a campus that infiltrates the core of the city's downtown business district. Inside, underground tunnels connect these disparate buildings in a web of activity, with employees moving back and forth in a buzzing maze of human energy.

The world of Premium is richly textured and brimming with humanity and life. Getting beyond the front door requires a security clearance. Regular employees have picture

IDs that they flash on a daily basis in front of the security guard. Visitors must wait at the front desk while another security employee phones the visitee to announce her or his visit. With many visitors passing through this institution every day, there are always several people waiting to get clearance. As a new visitor, I joined this crowd several times. Then I was brought into the inner fold, as Elana—my emissary and cultural translator—escorted me to the ID office to get my photo taken. With a flash of my photo ID, I too was officially welcome to pass the security guard, day or night.

On my first visit to Premium, I found the sheer size and proportion of its campus overwhelming. It made me feel very small, as I warily selected one of twenty-some elevators to ride to the sixtieth floor, where I would meet Elana, a key official in the human resources department and my soon-to-become confidante and key informant. Once inside, I was welcomed so warmly by Elana that I quickly forgot my utter disorientation. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but feel the contrast between the humanity of individual employees and the emptiness of this work environment. As Elana and I wove through grayish hallways, an ever-confusing maze of pathways that led to seemingly hidden conference rooms, she helped me weave my way through the bureaucracy of this behemoth corporation.

Once upstairs in the work areas, one can hear a constant background din of elevator bells ringing. The sound is so noticeable because the work environment is so quiet. Initially I imagined that it would drive me crazy and make it impossible to concentrate. But like many of the day-to-day annoyances to which one acclimates oneself in the workplace, the sound disappeared from my consciousness over time. The floors of each building at Premium are warehouse-sized,

divvied up into work stations that reflect the status of the employee as well as the structure of the work group. In one department, the middle manager has his own office, a grand, wood-finished room with a large desk and ample space for meetings. He presides over a pool of workers who are crammed into a glass-enclosed room, their desks lined up in rows facing in the same direction. In this area, comings and goings are monitored with precision, as the lower-status employees report to their superiors each trip to the bathroom or coffee break.

In another department, where collaborative teams predominate, middle managers' offices are located either next to or within a maze of cubbies, which are occupied by their subordinates. The outer walls are barren, painted in a nondescript beige. Inside, the cubbies are very small, cordoned-off "offices" with half-partitions offering a sense of privacy. These illusive privacy keepers provide wall space where people put up photos of their family members, or maybe a cartoon or quote clipped from a newspaper. In this colorless environment, the wall decorations give a small but important glimpse into each individual's life and humanity.

Despite the lackluster appearance of their surroundings, these employees are treated as "professionals," meaning that they are trusted to self-monitor their time as long as they complete the job. Trust and responsibility come with increased occupational status, and this manifests itself in subtle but important physical ways.

Upper-level managers' offices are often protected by the outer shell of a secretary's office. In contrast to middle managers' offices, those on the top have much more space and, in some cases, extraordinary views.

Organizational structure, management practices and styles, gendered status differentials, and the nature of the

work all contribute to variations in culture throughout the company, creating numerous subcultures.

The main tower building of Premium has an impressive range of services, making it possible for employees never to leave this corporate campus. Be it food, clothing, medical or dental services, ATM machines and banking services, employment support, a fully equipped fitness center, or on-site child care, Premium has it all. Time is not wasted in this "company town," as Premium provides all the accoutrements necessary to carry out day-to-day activities, from the most basic to the most celebrated functions of life. Not surprisingly, many Premium employees told me that they had become "hooked" on the easy access to the array of available localized services. For residents of a city within a city, these services are one of the great benefits of the job.

On the ground floor of Premium's main building lies its first-rate cafeteria, which sells nearly anything anyone could possibly want, regardless of dietary restrictions, peculiar tastes, or desire for indulgences. The food area is large and confusing to a novice visitor, with an overwhelming number of choices located in different stations around a gigantic room. Sheer numbers speak to the restaurant's popularity, given its easy access and its subsidized prices. Next to this food area is a comfortable dining area with small tables scattered around the room. There is an occasional half-partition, which creates the effect of a smaller, more intimate atmosphere, in spite of its grandiosity.

While nonmanagers dine in this ground-floor cafeteria, there is a special dining room for managers—located on a higher floor—which is much more elegant. Such perks are awarded to those who climb the occupational ladder; even the location of eateries symbolizes the progression in the ladder's rungs.

In a separate take-out food store located conveniently next to the cafeteria, there are delicious frozen take-home dinners for the overworked, as well as a veritable panoply of snack foods, including ice cream and frozen yogurt, cookies and candy, popcorn and peanuts. Chocolate chip cookies and other delicious sweets are baked on the premises, sending a homespun smell throughout the entire floor. At Christmas or Thanksgiving, employees can save time by buying plump turkeys at Premium. Couples about to be married can even purchase their wedding cakes right at work!

Within this food arena is the only space available at Premium explicitly intended for socializing. Upstairs in the office areas, people might congregate in someone's cubicle or in the hallway. But there really are no common spaces for people just to ''hang out.'' This large room on the ground floor is lined with comfortable couches and chairs around its rim, with tables located in the center. It is sprinkled with ATM machines for nearly every local bank. Employees sit and read or chat; an ongoing card game reconvenes daily; it offers a lull in the day amid the constant flow of people coming and going around them.

Premium's fitness center is state-of-the-art, with a weight room and daily aerobic classes throughout the day. The commercial clothing store located on-site is stocked with children's and adult ware, stuffed animals, and cards. Got a chipped tooth? Go to the company dentist. Have a fever? Go to the company doctor.

In fact, Premium's services and programs serve as a means to attract and retain employees, as well as maintain high productivity. Having it all at one's fingertips is an incentive to stay on the job and to stay put within the building. The culture of the organization, while comprised of many, many subcultures, is still maintained under one roof.

Simply put, when you have lunch in the cafeteria or shop at Premium stores, the imperative to work surrounds you both literally and figuratively.

As I watched and listened, I looked for the physical signs that would reveal an individual's status within the company. In one meeting, I was introduced to a high-level manager— a man—and his all-female group of subordinates, to discuss getting access to his department. The man was quite forthright, shaking my hand to welcome me. The women, all professional employees, were frighteningly quiet as they deferred to him for the go-ahead to speak. The only woman who spoke with great confidence in that meeting was a lone African American woman.

I remember thinking that to get as far as she had gotten up the corporate ladder, she must have used her voice as a tremendous force. Even the most forceful upper-level female manager I met was relatively soft-spoken when we met together with a group of upper-level male managers.

Women at the top must be ever-conscious of how they appear in this male-defined culture. Elana, the human resources professional who initially welcomed me into Premium and continued to be an ongoing contact throughout my study, was somewhat of an exception because of her independent status within the company. Unfettered by the hierarchy of individual departments, she had tremendous latitude to insert herself in nearly any sector throughout the entire company. And yet, because she managed people's problems and not people per se, she lacked the official formal status of an upper-level employee. In a sense, she had to comply with the norms that applied to women at the top, and yet, as an independent force within the company, she was able to see how the norms played out according to occupational status and gender.

As I initially learned from Elana, and then observed myself, for those on the inside, personal appearances immediately reveal the status of an employee. In the early 1980s, when women began increasingly to enter upper levels of management, they tried very hard to play the part of, and even "look" like, men as they struggled for respect and acceptance within a male-defined workplace culture. These women wore two-piece suits in solid colors with bow ties and medium-length skirts. Consciously or unconsciously, they struggled to gain the respect of their male colleagues, and outward appearances played a significant part in their efforts.

Over time, as women have more firmly entrenched themselves within the upper levels of management, it has become more acceptable for them to wear dresses, as long as they are conservative: not too short, no loud colors, no flamboyant styles. That is considered progress.

Hair length is another status giveaway. Upper-level management women wear their hair short. Further down the occupational ladder, more "feminine" styles are acceptable. But for high-status women, long hair is too easily associated with popular images of women as sexual beings, the last thing these women want, as they work hard to gain respect and acceptance from their male peers.

The clothing norm trickled down to other employees as well, as clothing reflects one's status in the corporation. Middle-level managers tended to dress conservatively, with men in suits and women in dresses. Only a few women in middle management told me that they wore pants at times. Nonmanagers dressed the most casually, and they apparently were the target of a companywide policy that proclaimed Fridays as "Casual Day."

This edict, which received mixed reviews, permitted em-

ployees to dress "casually" only on Fridays. While some employees appreciated the notion of a casual dress day, others found the policy somewhat ludicrous. In defining what "casual" meant, upper management seemed to make arbitrary distinctions as they proclaimed "no polyester pants for women" and "no jeans for all employees." Jokes flew about polyester pants, with employees making mock investigations about the fabric of women's pants. Others wryly reasoned that if jeans could not be worn on Fridays, they could be worn between Mondays and Thursdays. As a measure of their integrity and humor, employees reacted without malice.

Ultimately, upper-level managers realized that they were entirely out of sync with the masses of employees in imposing and detailing a dress code. In the end, at a meeting held for employees of one department, one of the upper-level managers wore a crew-necked shirt that he had proclaimed off-limits, and made jokes about the dress code in an attempt to bring himself back into the fold.

Elana joked about how it wasn't worth it for her to observe a "Casual Day," because it would mean buying a whole new wardrobe to meet the Friday dress code. Nonetheless, she was very aware of the impact of her appearance: as a woman, as a human resources professional, and as an employee who needed to be accepted by all employees in order to be effective. Part of Elana's job required a special sensitivity to the gender and occupational biases that exist within the company, and a willingness to play the game "enough" to achieve this effectiveness.

When we spoke about the norms that defined choices that upper-level managers made about their appearance, I realized that despite the norms about hair length, Elana had long waves of black, shiny hair. She was the only

woman I met at her occupational level with long hair, and this was her own subtle form of "appearance rebellion." In this small, but important way, Elana was breaking the rules within this highly codified environment.

Trying to understand Premium's workplace culture was a little like bringing into focus an impressionist painting. At first, I was too close. There were so many colors, and so many layers, and it didn't look like anything recognizable. When I thought I could see the picture clearly, I would find another dimension of the painting that filled it out even more. The process was intriguing. But when I thought I was nearly there, I realized that in order to bring the picture into focus, I needed to revisit my basic premise: that parental leave was necessary to de-gender caregiving practices.