

Chapter 4

FAMILY SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORS BEHAVIOUR FOR THE SANDWICH GENERATION: CONSID- ERATIONS FOR TRAINING PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the specific role employers and supervisors (SVs) can play in assisting the working sandwich generation (WSG) to find a good balance between work, dual care responsibilities and family. After a brief overview of the main concepts and ideas, the focus lies on the concept of family supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB) defined as behaviours exhibited by SVs that are supportive of employees' family roles, in relation to health, well-being, and organisational outcomes. Based on the insights from qualitative research and a tested training concept, points of consideration are formulated for SVs in supporting the WSG. In addition to concrete tips in the area of general policy, learning objectives have been formulated for a supportive leadership style for the WSG, accompanied by a self-assessment tool.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, research on work–family conflict (WFC) has focussed on the working population in their early and mid-career, when most families have younger and dependent children. The literature usually assumed an inverted U-curve whereby working people experienced the most severe conflict

between work and family responsibilities in the middle of their career. This assumption is being questioned and the idea of an older working generation with few family obligations is being challenged (Thrasher, Zabel, Wynne, & Baltes, 2015). Life events such as adult children returning to the parental home, informal care for elderly parents or parents-in-law or the illness of a partner or divorce at a later age call for a much more nuanced view of the older working generation. There is increasing evidence that older employees who combine work with a caregiving role and the working sandwich generation (WSG) in particular experience increased WFC (Aazami, Shamsuddin, & Akmal, 2018; Burke & Calvano, 2017; Clancy, Henle, & Fruhauf, 2020; DePasquale et al., 2017). In order to reduce the WFC, several actors have to play a subsidiary role (Den Dulk, Peper, Kanjuo Mrčela, & Ignjatović, 2016) such as governments, supporting organisations, the working population itself and their families and last but not least the different actors of the workplace context: employers, supervisors, HR professionals and colleagues.

This chapter explores the support that the work environment can offer to the WSG to better balance the dual care task with a family, specifically highlighting the crucial role of the direct supervisor (SV) through the adoption of family supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB). To this end, we give practical recommendations for employers and SVs to better support the WSG in the workplace both through policy recommendation and through a specific FSSB training for the WSG.

2. CONCEPTUAL MODELS

The bundle of practices of supportive measures that can take place within the workplace to support the combination of family and work receives various terms within the literature such as family supportive practices (Turgeman-Lupo, Toker, Ben-Avi, & Shenhar-Tsarfaty, 2020), work–life balance policies (Perrigino, Dunford, & Wilson, 2018), work–family supports (Masterson, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2021), etc. Often this refers primarily to the more instrumental opportunities that can help workers at different stages of life to achieve a better work–life balance. Depending on the legal framework and current opportunities, it can cover a wide range of possibilities and practices ranging from flexible work schedules and leave options to on-site childcare centres or ironing services. However, the scale at which these practices are offered, the ease of access to them for both women and men from different life stages and different organisational positions and the perception of their supportiveness, is largely determined by organisational culture. Thompson,

Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) define a supportive work–family organisational culture as the ‘shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives’ (p. 394).

Coinciding with this, it is evidenced that the immediate SV in particular plays a crucial, linking and gatekeeping role in both access to opportunities and perceptions of family supportive practices (Brady & Hammer, 2021; Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Kossek, Petty, et al., 2018; ter Hoeven, Miller, Peper, & den Dulk, 2017). A SV can be stimulating but can also adopt an unsupportive attitude towards family supportive practices installed by the higher management level (Kossek, Odle-Dusseau, & Hammer, 2018). Hammer et al. (2009) have developed a multidimensional measure of FSSB. FSSB is defined as the portrayed behaviour of the SV that is supportive of families and that provides support that makes the employee feel emotionally and instrumentally supported by the SV.

The FSSB includes four types of behaviours: emotional support, daily job and personal problem solving, role modelling and acknowledgement of the strategic importance of work–family issues, also known as proactive and creative work–family management. Emotional support is ensuring that people feel cared for, that their feelings are taken into account and that they feel comfortable in approaching their manager about family issues when necessary. Instrumental support is reactive and refers to work–family behaviours in the form of flexible working hours. Role modelling refers to SVs demonstrating themselves how to balance work and family in the workplace, by signposting to employees what is acceptable behaviour in terms of work–family balance. Creative work–family management is proactive and innovative and involves action on the team level. Examples of creative work–family management include thinking about how work can be organised to reduce WFC while improving both a team’s and an individual’s performance, and challenging organisational assumptions about how time is used and how work is done. An increasing number of studies show a positive effect of FSSB on improved work–family balance (Greenhaus, Ziegert, & Allen, 2012; Kossek, Petty, et al., 2018), work motivation (Bosch, Heras, Russo, Rofcanin, & Grau i Grau, 2018), job satisfaction and physical and psychological health (Crain & Stevens, 2018).

3. A FSSB TRAINING FOR SVS OF THE WSG

FSSB is not a personal characteristic, but a behaviour that can be influenced by, for example, targeted training. There is mounting evidence that training

in which SVs learn how best to support their employees, both in their work role and non-work roles can have many positive effects on well-being, health and turnover intentions (Brady & Hammer, 2021). The literature has already described various elements that can be part of an FSSB training such as a web-based introduction, face-to-face role playing, discussion boards and cognitive self-monitoring for different work contexts (Brady & Hammer, 2021; Kossek, Odle-Dusseau, et al., 2018).

Within the framework of the Flemish Time4Help programme, two webinars with SVs and HR professionals were conducted. They were modelled on the training framework developed by Brady and Hammer (2021) and Hammer & Kossek (2013) and using input from qualitative research described in Chapter 1. The training consists of four parts: (1) presentation of the specific situation of the WSG with attention to how work can play both a positive and a negative role in well-being; (2) ideas for general family supportive practices and policies which can be interesting for the WSG; (3) introduction of the four components of FSSB with a special emphasis on practical considerations for the WSG; and (4) introduction of a self-monitoring tool for FSSB including a specific gender and generation perspective. This chapter provides some key points of consideration that may be inspiring to both practitioners and researchers.

(1) *The specific situation of the WSG and the role of work:*

- A training course for SVs should provide insight into the complex and varied reality of the WSG, although the situation should not be over-problematised but it should be indicated that a double care role in combination with a job creates specific challenges.
- Attention to the WSG should be based on a broad view of a generation-sensitive policy where generational aspects are approached in a positive way and where the different generations can be illuminated and supported in a positive way.
- For many people from the sandwich generation (SG), work is an important source of energy in their lives. Work keeps them from ‘drowning’ in their caring roles. In this respect, it is important that the WSG receives sufficient support, both from the general policy, their direct SV and their colleagues. A motivated WSG is an important source of support and experience within an organisation.
- Quantitative and qualitative information about the WSG can strengthen awareness building and understanding. The various chapters in this publication provide plenty of inspiration for this. It is important to take

into consideration that there are clear gender differences in the perception of FSSB and that employees with a good financial situation often feel better supported than employees who consider their financial situation (very) poor. Particular attention should be paid to male and financially disadvantaged employees.

(2) Ideas for general family supportive practices and policies which can be interesting for the WSG:

- The WSG regularly needs time to schedule care tasks or has a need for flexibility in response to the unexpected. If the WSG is able to function in a work environment that allows them to sufficiently determine how their working time is organised, the combination of a dual care task with a job can be a great success. This makes the combination of a double care task with a job much more manageable.
- In some jobs, it is not possible to build flexible hours into the work schedule. It can therefore be helpful if the SG can take the initiative, by switching shifts, for instance, or taking a (half) day off with brief notice.
- Teleworking can be an important tool for all generations to better combine work and family life and also achieve efficiency gains. This also applies to the WSG. The COVID-19 experience has provided a boost in the digital homeworking skills of all homeworkers, including the WSG. A nuanced and supportive telework policy will be a continuing aspect of FSS in organisations now and in the future.
- The holiday policy of companies can mean a lot for the balance between family and work. Some companies take the private situation into account when granting leave or have priority rules for specific groups of employees when choosing their leave dates. For the SG, it is important that this not only benefits younger families, but that employees with other caring responsibilities are also taken into consideration. Many sandwich workers use their holidays to look after their grandchildren during the school holidays or to plan care activities. It may be equally important for some sandwich workers that there are also opportunities to take unpaid leave.
- In several countries, there are already leave possibilities whereby employees can reduce their working hours temporarily or partially, while retaining certain rights and with possible financial compensation. In addition, as a result of The European Work–Life Balance Directive of 2019, additional legal possibilities will arise in various EU countries, such as a special carers' leave: workers providing personal care or support to

a relative will be entitled to five days of leave per year. Employers can promote these opportunities in a positive way and lower the barriers to access for women and men of all generations and from all functions and positions in the company.

(3) Introduction of the four components of FSSB with a special emphasis on practical considerations for the WSG:

Supportive measures from the organisation's policy are a prerequisite for creating a family-friendly climate. However, these measures will only be truly effective if they are accompanied by genuine support from the direct SV. In other words, the direct SV is the most important link in a family-friendly climate. A training course explains the four components of FSSB and provides tangible guidance that can support the WSG.

- *Daily job and personal problem solving.* The SV assists individual employees in solving the daily and practical problems that arise in connection with the combination of family and work. The WSG is often faced with urgent and unforeseen circumstances and must be able to respond quickly and accurately. Sometimes it is a matter of a long-term relief from work, for example, when a family member is hospitalised. Together with the WSG, the SV looks for possibilities adapted to the specific situation, such as adjusting working hours, assignments or deadlines at the request of an employee; giving the employees themselves the opportunity to make adjustments; providing information about possibilities such as carer's leave, palliative leave, etc.
- *Emotional support.* The SV is open and empathetic and offers room for employees to talk about family-related issues. The SV listens compassionately and recognises that it can be difficult to balance work and family life.

Specific to the WSG:

- The SV asks open questions and shows interest without being indiscrete.
- The SV respects the emotional strain, feelings of guilt and role overload that may accompany dual care responsibilities.
- The SV does not compare people and considers individual situations.
- The SV will let it be known if he/she has experience with care situations him/herself without comparing their situation to the care situation of the co-workers or presenting him/herself as a role model.

- *Role modelling.* The SV's own attitude tells a lot about the expectations of the SV towards the employees. Organisations can only promote a good combination of family and work if the managers also show that they try to maintain a good balance themselves and set an example, being careful not to speak or act in a normative way. The SV is able to draw a clear line between work and family, for example, by not sending an abundance of messages outside working hours. In addition, the SV can tell about his/her own search for good combination strategies and how this involves trial and error. For the WSG, it is certainly also important to discuss generational differences between colleagues in dealing with priorities, hours and flexibility.
- *Proactive and creative work–family management.* The SV improves the effectiveness of employees in a proactive, strategic and innovative way. The SV organises the work in such a way that employees can organise their job as efficiently as possible and ensure that the work organisation is beneficial for a positive balance between family and work. This creates a win–win situation for the organisation and for the employee. For the WSG, it is important that the SV primarily takes a positive attitude towards all work–family opportunities provided by the company and the legislator and helps promote these opportunities for both women and men and employees of different ages. In addition, especially after the COVID-19 experience, it is important to develop a balanced and supportive telework practice at team level. It is also important that the SV is sufficiently participative in organising the work and distributing tasks.

(4) *Self-assessment instrument:*

The training ended with the opportunity for the participants to engage in self-reflection and set their own goals with which to grow in family supportive leadership. For this purpose, a specific instrument was developed according to the following framework:

- *Step 1: Register:* What is my 'default' leadership style? What family supportive behaviours do I already display as a SV? How does this come across to my employees?

Over the next two weeks, map out the four sub-aspects of family supportive leadership by 'monitoring' your own behaviour. Always look at each of the four aspects of a family supportive leadership style and at an open attitude as a general condition. Ideally, you should repeat this exercise after four weeks and thus register again for a fortnight the four sub-aspects of family supportive leadership that you express to your staff.

- *Step 2: Analyse and reflect.* Looking back, which aspects of family supportive leadership do I use frequently and/or sufficiently? Which aspects can I still strengthen? Which family supportive leadership behaviours do I not yet use?
- *Step 3: Formulating specific objective(s).* What are challenging but achievable goals to grow towards a (more) family supportive leadership style?
- *Step 4: Contextualising.* What support is needed from your organisation to help realise the goals?

4. CONCLUSION

Similar to employees from other life stages, it is important for the motivation and well-being of the WSG to have sufficient formal and informal support at work for combining a dual care task with a job. Both general policy and informal support from the direct SV are important in this regard. This chapter offered a model that gives HR staff and SVs concrete tools to support the WSG. Building on the training model proposed by Hammer and Kossek, we developed a holistic tool that focusses on FSSB but at the same time highlights the importance of family supportive policy and practices. Some important conclusions also emerged from the testing. (1) A training should not only focus on the improvement of informal support offered by SVs but should sufficiently embed this in concrete recommendations in general support measures and a general supportive family climate. (2) Providers of training should sufficiently emphasise that a focus on the WSG does not prevent, but rather encourages, inclusive policies. Framing efforts aimed at improving FSSB as beneficial for WSG but for other groups of workers as well could help prevent potential resistance occurring in certain groups of workers which are not directly targeted by the training intervention. Moreover, framing could lower the possibility of WSG feeling stigmatised by the training efforts. (3) A self-selection effect whereby primarily participants are attracted who already have a high sensitivity for FSSB should be taken into account. Being approachable and emphasising the win-win is important in communication. (4) The proposed training and self-assessment tool have mainly an important awareness-raising effect. To achieve actual behavioural change in the support offered by direct SVs, it is recommended to organise a (peer) coaching programme as a follow-up, an important aspect beyond the scope of the current research project. Future research could take into account actual change in FSSB and focus

on measuring the mid- to long-term effects on WSG and on the organisation as a whole by including follow-up programmes into the research design.

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