

MANAGING UP

# When Your Boss Doesn't Respect Your Family Commitments

by [Rebecca Knight](#)

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Jelena Jojic Tomic/Stocksy

When trying to balance your work and family commitments, it helps to have a boss who is understanding and supportive: someone who doesn't raise an eyebrow when you sign off early to attend a school event or take a personal day to accompany an aging parent to a doctor's appointment.

But what if your manager isn't sympathetic to your familial responsibilities? Or worse, your boss is outright dismissive or is even hostile toward your obligations? This is particularly challenging during the pandemic when many people's work and home lives have collided. How should you handle a boss who refuses to acknowledge the other demands on your time? How can you find room for flexibility? What should you say about your family commitments? And who should you turn to for moral and professional support?

### **What the Experts Say**

Too many working parents and other employees with extensive caregiving responsibilities have stories of a manager who gives them an assignment at 4 pm and asks for it the next morning, or a boss who makes disparaging comments about another working parent who doesn't seem loyal to the company. "There are some managers who are unsympathetic to the challenges their employees face at home and some who intentionally turn a blind eye," says Avni Patel Thompson, the founder and CEO of Modern Village, a company that provides technology solutions for parents. "Other managers may have positive intent but lack empathy or ideas on how to [support their employees]."

When you work for a manager who doesn't recognize your family obligations, your strategy must be multifaceted, says Ella F. Washington, professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and a consultant and coach at Ellavate Solutions. You need to figure out how to productively navigate the situation with your boss, while also collaborating with your colleagues and family to create a schedule and "set boundaries" that work for everyone. The goal is to "try to get your boss to meet you halfway," she says. Here are some ideas.

### **Know your rights.**

First things first, "know your rights" and understand what you're entitled to in terms of paid leave and care options, says Thompson. Do some research into your company's policies and whether there are alternative work arrangements on offer. Long before the pandemic hit, an increasing number of organizations instituted flexible work plans for employees, and many states have flex-work policies in place for their government workers.

Find out, too, if your situation qualifies you for the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act. The law requires some employers to provide paid leave to workers who must care for someone subject to quarantine or a child whose day care or school is closed. Washington recommends talking to your company's HR person, if you have one, to learn what options and accommodations are available to you. "Knowledge is power," she says.

### **Be upfront about your personal situation.**

Next, have a one-on-one conversation with your boss in which you are "honest and transparent about your limitations," says Thompson. Make clear your commitment to the company and your team, but also explain the additional responsibilities outside of work. After all, your manager's lack of sympathy is likely not malicious, but thoughtless. For instance, if your boss doesn't have children, they may be aware of the "superficial or obvious" tasks related to remote learning during the pandemic, but oblivious to the fact that parents are also serving as their kids' tech support, math tutors, writing coaches, and line cooks, says Thompson. It may not be an easy conversation. But don't let your discomfort cause you to avoid the subject. "Silence is what makes managers nervous," warns Thompson. Remember, too, you're not throwing a woe-is-me pity party, says Washington. "This isn't about making excuses" — you're stating facts. Your tone should exude confidence and commitment.

### **Exhibit empathy.**

Next, summon compassion. It's not easy to be a boss, especially right now. Many managers are under pressure. "They're stressed, anxious, and struggling to do more with less," says Washington. Consider the situation from their perspective.

Thompson says your empathy should be both "genuine and strategic." Ask your manager about their pain points. Find out where their worries lie. Be sincere — show you care about them as a human being — and be tactical. Ask about their "objectives and the metrics they need to hit," she says. "You'll get important information about what they're concerned about" which will help you sharpen your focus in terms of the work you prioritize.

### **Have a plan — or two or three.**

Once you “understand what’s top of mind” for your manager, you can frame your plans for getting your job done in a way helps them achieve their goals and objectives, says Thompson. Focus on results. When you’re a caregiver, your schedule can often be unpredictable so it’s important to make a plan as well as several contingency ones. Address your manager’s “insecurities about you not pulling your weight” by demonstrating that you’re “making arrangements to get your work done.” You want your manager to come away from your conversations thinking, “They’ve got this.”

Don’t be shy about reminding your manager of your track record for delivering on expectations, adds Washington. “Your past performance is the strongest indicator of your future performance,” she says. Hopefully, your manager will come to see “that what’s most important is not *how* the job gets done, but that it gets done.”

### **Communicate often.**

Always keep your boss in the loop, says Washington. If you’re not in the office, you might consider “instituting a daily check in” or at least providing an email update every few days. “Your objective is to make your manager feel comfortable that the work is getting done,” she says.

This communication doesn’t need to require more face time though. Instead of a status update conference call, you could write an email to your team that lays out “your objectives for the week and gives visibility to what you’re working on.” Or in place of a team meeting on Zoom, encourage your colleagues to “collaborate on Slack,” which allows you to “fire off messages even while your kids are sitting next to you.”

### **Articulate boundaries.**

If your boss is a face time tyrant, it can be tough to establish boundaries, but it’s still important to do. We all need time in our day that’s off-limits for work, says Washington. “If 6 pm is when you have dinner and put the kids down,” so be it. “Have those boundaries — and let your boss know that you will be unavailable then.”

But if your manager continues to be disrespectful of your family time, you need to have a conversation. Frame the discussion around you — how you prefer to structure your workday and how and when you perform best. Explain that you need your non-work hours to regroup and take care of your family commitments. Without that time away from work, you will not be able to fully devote yourself to your job.

### **Broaden your network.**

If your direct boss continues to be difficult about your family commitments, make a concerted effort to find allies within your organization, says Thompson. These allies might include peers, colleagues in different departments, and managers outside your division. “Build relationships with people who see you for the whole life that you have,” says Thompson. “That way, if down the line if things gets contentious [with your boss] you’ve got options.”

In addition to broadening your professional network, allies offer moral support, says Washington. Talk to your colleagues and find out how they’re balancing their jobs with their caregiving responsibilities. “Find out how others are making this work,” she says.

### **Take care of yourself.**

Working for someone who doesn’t respect your life outside of work can be exhausting so make sure you’re taking time for yourself. Be purposeful about giving yourself “a forced mental break,” says Thompson. Make time to read, cook, dance, run, meditate — or any other activity that you enjoy or helps you relax. “Schedule joy,” she says.

And even if exercise isn’t usually your thing, Thompson suggests finding time for it every day, especially during this difficult period. “Don’t underestimate the power of 20-30 minutes of daily physical activity,” she says. At a time when your boss is being difficult and “nothing feels in your control,” getting your endorphins pumping should be a priority.

### **Bide your time.**

Even with your best efforts, the situation may not improve. In this case, Thompson’s recommendation is to be the best employee you can be under the circumstances. “Make sure you deliver on expectations,” she says. “Don’t give your boss any ammunition”

against you. Your boss might never be empathetic to your personal situation, says Washington. “If you’re not getting support and the organization is not being inclusive of your needs, maybe this work environment isn’t the best for your career development,” she says. It may be time to move on.

## **Principles to Remember**

### Do

- Show compassion for your boss. Understand their goals and prioritize your work around them.
- Be proactive and devise multiple plans for how you’ll work day to day as well as several contingencies for if/when the situation changes.
- Forge relationships with people in your organization who understand your personal circumstances and who can provide options if things sour with your boss.

### Don’t

- Avoid talking to your boss about your outside commitments. Be upfront and honest about family obligations.
- Be rigid. Get creative in how and when you get work done.
- Neglect your mental and physical wellbeing while working for an unsympathetic boss. Make time for hobbies and other activities.

## **Advice in Practice**

**Case Study #1: Talk to HR about what you’re entitled to — and be willing to move on if the relationship doesn’t improve.**

Jennifer Walden, director of operations at WikiLawn, an online company for garden professionals, says that while her current employer and manager has been flexible and accommodating regarding her family commitments, she wasn’t always as fortunate.

A few years ago, when she worked in the gaming industry, her boss — we'll call him Jerry — was unsympathetic to the fact that Jennifer was a mother and that one of her children had health issues. “It was really hard,” recalls Jennifer. “I remember feeling guilty because I felt I was much less productive at work when my daughter was having complications. I was constantly worried about her.”

From the moment she took the job, Jennifer was open and transparent about her responsibilities at home. “I remember asking my boss early on if there were opportunities to work from home on days when my daughter’s health was especially poor,” she says.

Jerry said no. “He shut down any conversation having to do with remote work and flexible schedules,” she says.

He was overbearing and expected immediate responses to his calls and emails — even on weekends. Jennifer, meanwhile, was diligent. After a couple of months, she followed up with Jerry to plead her case. She talked about her commitment to the company and pointed to her conscientiousness and past track record of meeting her deadlines.

“I tried to alleviate his fears by being proactive in saying how I’d make up any missed work, alter my schedule, and check in regularly from home,” she says.

He still didn’t budge.

She began reaching out to colleagues on her team for support and encouragement. She learned that many of them had similar frustrations.

Together, they decided to talk to HR. “HR did help somewhat,” she says. “I fought for the right to work from home on the days my daughter was struggling — our organization allowed this, even though my boss hadn’t previously signed off.”

But ultimately, the stress of working for a manager who dismissed her personal life wasn't worth it. Jennifer left the job. Her experience at Wikilawn is entirely different. "We have unlimited PTO here," she says. "My boss also frequently asks after my daughter and whether or not I need more time to get projects done when her health issues flare up."

## **Case Study #2: Show your commitment to the company and deliver on expectations.**

Willie Greer, founder of The Product Analyst, a Memphis, TN-based company that produces technology and product reviews, says he knows well what it feels like have his family commitments dismissed by his boss.

A few years ago, he worked as an HR manager in the digital marketing industry. At the time, Willie had young children at home, and a spouse who also worked full-time.

When he first started at the company, he and his boss — we'll call her Sheila — had a good working relationship. Willie was a top performer, and Sheila trusted him by giving him more challenging, high-profile assignments.

But after Willie's child care situation changed, their relationship grew tense. Willie asked if he could leave work early two days a week in order to pick up his kids from school, and Sheila turned him down. "I told her I would make up the work at night, but she said that I was needed in the office," he says.

Willie knew he needed to take action. First, he empathized with Sheila. He asked her about her priorities and concerns. She told him that she was under a lot of pressure from management and that she was particularly nervous about several looming projects.

Second, he demonstrated his commitment to the company and his job. Willie told Sheila that he would focus his attention on those projects. "I wanted her to know that the work was in safe hands," he says.



Finally, he was open and honest about his familial responsibilities. “I told her that my children were young, and that I needed a little leniency and flexibility.”

Sheila wasn't enthusiastic about his request, but she agreed to a trial. Willie kept his focus on the projects and made sure that he hit every deadline. He sent Sheila regular updates and status reports to assuage her worries. And two days a week, he left work an hour early to pick up his kids.

The situation improved, but Willie still felt unhappy. “I wanted to work for a manager that values her people and who understands that there is more to life than work,” he says.

He landed a new job relatively quickly and, not long after that, he founded his company. “I've created a working environment where employees can become the best versions of themselves.”

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