

Employers recognize value of work-life coaching

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Calgary golfer Stephen Ames, receiving a hug from sons Justin and Ryan, recently focused attention on the importance of balancing work and family life.

Fans and media were gob-smacked when Stephen Ames, fresh from a golf win at the recent Players Championship, shrugged off talk of the Masters game of games he instantly qualified for, and instead left them hanging.

A day later, he returned to say he had consulted with his wife about a scheduling conflict over a family holiday and all was well. He could accommodate Disneyland and pro golf.

This probably isn't a flashpoint in social culture, but it resonated loudly, in the days after, for any parent at the office water cooler discussing their own work-life games.

Finding real-life harmony is the relentless goal of employees determined to work where they can also have a life.

So it may be no surprise that Toronto-based Lifespeak Inc., provider of in-house workshops on topics such as parenting and eldercare, recently set up shop in Calgary. Lifespeak counts Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, Ernst & Young and Suncor Energy Inc. among its clients.

At a recent session in a downtown legal tower, a free 90-minute parenting session on sibling rivalry was offered to staff, with a special invite to spouses.

Led by parent educator Gail Bell of Parenting Power, participants explored an hour of information on the vagaries of family life, followed by a 30-minute question-and-answer period on the specifics of feuding sibs.

The parenting topic doesn't matter, Bell explains, "because in the end, parents come away feeling they are not alone in their concerns. And they love the Q and A. At the end, there's always a queue."

Parenting is a very emotional and intensive period in an employee's life, Bell says.

"The sessions are real community-building experiences for staff and it seems to be working. Obviously, the company that engages in it, believes in it and wants this for their employees," she notes.

The bonus is increased satisfaction on the job and productivity at all levels, says the former school principal.

For companies across the country facing recruitment and retention problems, this rings true, says Tammy Robertson, who leads a University of Calgary business program called Work-Life Balance: Fully Engage for Success.

Not that long ago, trends analyst Linda Duxbury in Health Canada's 2003 status report cautioned employers to address escalating "role overload" of staff or experience the penalties of increased "mental health days," high benefit costs, lower job satisfaction and attracting and keeping the best staff.

For this reason, installing parenting, wellness and eldercare workshops during the workday is not the tough sell it once was, says Lifespeak's Alexis Wise, who adds Lifespeak has offices in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

"It's a tight labour market right now and the corporate culture knows it has to be supportive of employees at all levels," says Wise.

"It's interesting, because employees with teens are often at more senior levels and they are increasingly facing the compounded issue of aging parents -- and they're the ones speaking up."

While successfully integrating work demands and family needs is inscrutable, employees are painfully aware when life veers out of control.

Work-life balance is a burdened phrase, says Wise.

"It seems to be less about balance and more about work-life quality in all areas. So if employees feel in control of childcare and eldercare, they come to work with the right mental attitude."

And when work feels more manageable, parents go home to families ready to be fully involved, says Robertson, 44, a mother of two.

"Where ever I lead sessions -- which happens to be in Western Canada -- the message is the same. The generation, today, is not willing to sacrifice their health, family life and leisure pursuits for career," she adds.

"And that's a real block for the older generation because they perceive this as a lack of commitment. Yet, once you get both generations talking, there's a real connection around values. It's really more about, 'What does life mean?'"

"It's about showing up with passion in all aspects of your life. It's recognizing that we have so much available to us. It's about living every day full of gratitude."

Work-Life Harmony

- For more on Lifespeak Inc. and workplace programs such as Parents at Work, Generations

At Work and Vitality at Work, see www.lifespeak.ca.

- Tammy Robertson leads Work-Life Balance: Fully Engage for Success for the University of Calgary's business management certificate program.

Call 220-2988 or see www.cted.ucalgary.ca.

- Tammy Robertson of WorkHeart Consulting can be reached at 547-5344 or check www.tammyrobertson.com.

- For more on Parenting

Power programs and workshops by Gail Bell and Julie Freedman Smith, check

www.parentingpower.ca.

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