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**SPEECH BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
AT THE LUNCHEON TALK
ON "BALANCING THE NEW WORK-FAMILY EQUATION"
FRIDAY, 24 OCT 97
SUNTEC CITY BALLROOM 3, 12.00 NOON - 3.00 PM**

I am very pleased to be here with you today for this luncheon talk on "Balancing the New Work-Family Equation" by Dr Ronda Beaman.

Work and Family Nexus

In today's living, we find ourselves having to meet the twin demands of work and commitment to family. More is demanded of us as employees, parents and as caregivers. At work, there is pressure to meet rising job expectations, career aspirations as well as pressures to improve our standard of living. At home, we are faced with issues and concerns related to the care and upbringing of children and other domestic and household matters.

We have to face this barrage of demands and to balance these seemingly divergent roles. Yet, we cannot deny that the welfare of our families is inextricably linked to our performance in the workplace.

This was revealed in a survey conducted by Fortune Magazine in the late 1980s on 400 men and women with children below 12 years old. It was found that 39 per cent of them had reported for work late or left early in the three months preceding the survey period. For 72 per cent of them, this was due to family-related matters. Family problems or the need to care for a sick child accounted for 52 per cent of all absenteeism.

In the past, the father, being the sole breadwinner in the family, could concentrate on his work, whilst his wife, the homemaker, took care of the children and household. But with more families in Singapore having both parents working, the affairs and concerns of the family are increasingly shared by both the husband and wife. Employers will need to take cognizance of this fact, and work towards creating a family-friendly workplace which enhances both efficiency and morale.

Given our tight labour market and the growing trend of job-hopping, employers who are able to introduce programmes to help employees balance the work-family equation might just hold the key to retaining staff. Such programmes can go far in demonstrating to employees that employers care not just about their job performance, but are also concerned with their families.

Take for example in the United States, where a growing number of employers are concerned with the impact family responsibilities have on productivity, recruitment and retention. Some have even created the corporate position of a

“work-family manager” to support and enhance the company’s commitment to help employees balance work and family responsibilities.

Creating a “work-family” manager position is not entirely an altruistic move by these employers, as this initiative is linked to their bottom line. The work-family manager must continually make the business case for such programmes and develop cost justifications to support them. I believe such a role could gain support in Singapore over the next few years.

A Concerted Effort to Help Families

The Committee on the Family, set up under the Ministry of Community Development in 1989, and currently chaired by Mr Koh Juan Kiat, Executive Director of SNEF has, in recent years, centred its concern around the role of employers in creating a family-friendly environment in the workplace. I am pleased that this Committee is chaired by a member closely-linked to the business community and that we can synergise our efforts in this manner to strengthen the family in Singapore.

SNEF recently conducted a Survey on Family Friendly Benefits and Activities among member companies. There were 350 respondents covering 13 business sectors of various sizes. Of these, only 45 companies rated themselves as “very good” in terms of family-friendliness. What does family-friendliness mean? Some possible factors are flexible work arrangements, workplace childcare centres, organised talks for employees on handling family issues, programmes for families and organisational commitment to work-family issues.

Using the survey results, SNEF and NTUC will work out the criteria to recognise companies with benefits and programmes which enable their employees to reconcile their twin commitments of work and family. A new Pro-Family Company Award will be created and given to such model companies.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, what is really needed from employers is not the provision of fancy facilities or expensive programmes. What is more important is their recognition of the importance the family plays in affecting the success of the company. Employees need to know that they are not alone in fulfilling their different roles, whether it be at work or in the family. The family and the workplace can co-exist. I hope that all of you will benefit from today's seminar and leave with a heightened consciousness of the impact of family life on work. I also hope you will be able to apply some of the practical steps learnt here today in your organisation to help create a family-friendly workplace.

I wish you all a very pleasant and fruitful afternoon.

Thank you.
