

Why male executives should not be praised for taking paternity leave



Recently, I [announced](#) that my wife and I are expecting, and that I'll be taking the full 12 weeks of paternity leave offered by my company, [G2.com](#). I wasn't prepared for the kinds of responses that would come rushing in. Through social media, emails, texts, and phone calls, I've been getting much more than congratulations. I've been praised, and even thanked, for taking this leave. And many people have encouraged me to be sure to "really take off," rather than remaining connected to work during that time.

I was struck by the gender dynamics at play. I've never seen women be inundated with gratitude and praise for taking leave after having a baby. While the congratulations for having a child are just as big, the idea that they will take leave, and commit to time with their newborn child, seem to be simply expected.

While I'm grateful for the positivity and support people have offered, this difference speaks to larger issues of gender expectations in the workplace. I've come to understand why so many people responded the way they did. Unfortunately, many men don't take their full leave.

One [study](#) of nearly 12,000 people across seven countries found that fewer than half of men took the full leave offered, the World Economic Forum reports. Gender stereotypes "remain so strong," a co-author of the report explained.

In fact, some men have been [punished](#) for taking paternity leave by business leaders who still believe it's a "woman's job" to raise children, and a "man's job" to stay at work and make the money. Taking paternity leave, let alone the full one offered, can mean [risking your job](#) — something you can't do when you've got a new mouth to feed. As the head of a dad-focused website told [The Guardian](#), most workplaces "haven't caught up" with modern fatherhood, so "dads are still expected to follow the stereotype of being at work is the priority."

This gender difference can also apply to expected behaviour *during* leave. Far too many work cultures worldwide prize the idea of being "always on" — always available, around the clock. Some [lawyers](#), for example, say there's clear pressure at their firms to avoid even requesting paternity leave, but if you do take it, to keep it short and remain available to work throughout that time.

I've seen this kind of thing in action. I'll never forget when a colleague I previously worked with dialled in to a sales team meeting while his wife was giving birth — literally. To him it was a badge of honour, showing his loyalty to the company. To me, it was crazy.

Another peer was afraid to “ask” his boss whether he could take his paternity leave when his third child was on the way. Even the idea that he would have to request it was confusing to me. “Don’t ask,” I counselled him. “Just inform your boss when you’re going to take it.”

I grew up in Australia, where some [paid parental leave](#) is guaranteed. I now live in the United States, which stands [alone](#) among wealthy nations in having no guaranteed annual paid leave. So the pressures against taking it may be especially acute here.

Still, this imbalance must be addressed everywhere. Children need, and benefit from, time with mothers *and* fathers as caregivers. And making sure men can take paternity leave is important for gender equality. It’s a [family-oriented policy](#) that helps create a more level playing field. As the global consulting firm Mercer [puts it](#), “Want to improve gender equality at work? Help men take parental leave.”

My leave will start any day now. No one needs to tell me to commit fully to every moment of it. I plan to uninstall my work email and work calendar from my phone, and will not use my computer to check work emails.

Sure, the executive team knows that if something major happens and I absolutely must be consulted, they can call or text me. But I don’t expect them to. They know where I stand, and support me. Also, as I often say, we’re not brain surgeons or curing cancer. What we do is important, but not more important than a parent caring for and bonding with a newborn child.

By taking my full leave, I’ll be showing my team that I trust them to run the shop. I’ll be giving someone else on my team a chance to lead — coincidentally, she will be returning from her own maternity leave around the time I’m leaving on mine. And I’ll be showing employees throughout my company, my professional community, and anywhere else that there should be nothing to fear. I know and trust that my job will still be there when it’s time to go back. Every business should make this same message, loud and clear, to their entire workforce.



Notes:

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