

How to deal with the stigma of taking paternity leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Rob Bralow, 34, a father of two young boys and the co-owner of BLVD Wine Bar in Long Island City, heard some curious remarks from co-workers when he told them he was taking paternity leave. There was the incredulous, “Why would you want to be home with a baby for that long?” and the condescending, “I bet your wife appreciates what you are doing,” recalls the Hartsdale, NY resident.

His reply? “Why wouldn’t I want to be there to help raise my sons?” he says. “I am incredibly privileged to be able to take the time away to be with my newest family members.”

As of Jan. 1, anyone in New York state who works for a private employer is eligible to take paid family leave, making the state one of a handful that provides such a benefit. The new law provides paid time off to bond with a newly born, adopted or fostered child; to care for a close relative with a serious health condition; or to assist when a military family member is deployed abroad. Employees can keep their health insurance while on leave and are guaranteed the same or a comparable job after the leave ends.

David Ferragut, 35, a senior manager on Electronic Arts’ corporate strategy team in San Francisco, says he “never considered paternity leave benefits important before having kids, but once you do start a family you see how important it is to pick an employer who supports you. Since I was able to take leave, bond with my child and set him up with day care at the right time, I was able to come back to work stress-free and with the ability to focus on my work.”

Still, the stigma around taking paternity leave is real: According to a 2016 Deloitte survey, less than half of those surveyed believe their workplace helps men feel comfortable taking it. And more than one-third thought that taking parental leave would put their job in jeopardy.

But experts say that taking leave doesn’t have to derail your career. Keep these moves in mind.

Bring it up early

About five months before your partner is due, schedule a meeting with your supervisor, suggests Jaime Klein, founder and president of Inspire Human Resources. Make a business case for it: Research suggests that employees who take parental leave are less stressed, have fewer days of absence and are more likely to stay with the company.

Ferragut suggests having solutions on hand. “When I brought up the request, I followed with a solution for work coverage, whether it was shifting project responsibility or training someone to perform while you are away.”

Put a plan in place

Find someone (or a few people) who can take on key projects and will work parallel to you the month before your leave begins, suggests Klein.

“Having people you trust in place is an absolute necessity,” says Bralow. “There is no way I would have felt comfortable leaving if I did not have partners to share the workload while I was gone. In addition, we set up clear communication channels such as Slack, online calendars and e-mail chains so that I could be reached with anything nonurgent.”

Plan to work in overdrive the month before your leave and when you return, in order to wow your company, says Klein. “It’s a signal to the organization that you’re a high performer. Communicate this as a positive to your team from the start. Kick it off with something like, ‘We have this very progressive benefit. I have a plan, and I am so appreciative.’”

Be prepared for snarky comments

Even though his company was supportive, Dr. Robert Gross, 34, a neurology specialist at University of Colorado’s Anschutz Medical Campus, who started his paternity leave earlier this year, found that patients and co-workers would inadvertently refer to his “maternity leave.”

“I try not to let it get to me,” he says. “I guess it’s still a new thing for people to think about dads taking time off to be full-time parents.”

If a co-worker or boss grumbles about their lack of paternity leave, Klein says the best way to handle it is to acknowledge what they went through. She suggests something along the lines of, "I can only imagine how hard it was for you. I'm so appreciative, I hope that for your kids these policies become the norm." Emphasize that it's important for your family that you take this leave so you can bond with your child.

Unplug from work

Klein suggests you read emails so you're aware of what's happening, but do not respond to them. "The first time that you respond with an involved, cerebral answer, it signals that you're available for anything that needs input," she says. "People check in because they're afraid they won't be prepared and that they're checked out. [But] we should be checked out at this time."

Ease your transition back

As a business owner, Bralow was more looped-in than most men on paternity leave and worked from home. For an employee, he recommends getting in touch with your manager a week out from returning. "Ask questions, be proactive in tasks already in motion and see what you can do to complete them," he says. "By helping others you will see the current status of any job and earn credit with co-workers. Don't forget to recognize and thank the people who stepped up and performed well while you were gone."

-reprinted from New York Post

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