

Chapter One

Parental Leave Is a Mess— Let's Fix It!

TAKE A MOMENT and imagine your ideal parental leave experience. What would it be like to have ample time at home with your new child *and* receive your full paycheck the whole time? How would it feel if your manager, HR representatives, and work colleagues were thoroughly trained and given all the resources they might need to guide you? What if there was clarity in how to best hand off your work and to whom, what paperwork you needed and when, and how much time you could take off?

Imagine your team throwing you a celebratory send-off that gave you just the right amount of attention, in ways that remind you that they know and care for *you* as you embark on parental leave to welcome your new child. And what if it didn't stop there? What if when your child arrives, your team sends you a basket full of useful new essentials, and some of those really cute stylish items you had been eyeing but weren't going to splurge on. There is even a matching t-shirt and onesie set with your work logo, and the back of yours reads *Promoted to Parent!*

During your leave, they know just how and when to check in and what news you want to be kept in the loop on so that you can let go of the mental load of work to completely immerse yourself in

getting to know your child. When it is time to turn your attention back to work, they reach out to check if any of your return plans need to be adjusted and ask what they can do to make your first week (and beyond) go smoothly.

When you walk through those doors your first day back, you are able to breeze past any security because you have been proactively reactivated in the system. Your manager and colleagues have made a special effort to greet you with big smiles, and everyone wants to see more pictures of your new cutie pie. Your desk and IT access are set up flawlessly. A bouquet or a small plant welcomes you. When you sink into your chair you are able to soak in how much you were missed and how much your team values you. Even if you haven't been completely confident in yourself since you've been away, they are.

Notice how you felt imagining that future. Were your reactions unexpected? Did you feel hopefulness, pessimism, or something else? Did this feel like a possible future for you? Did you laugh at the idea? How did your body feel while you were visualizing this future? Were you tense or relaxed?

Now imagine if every new working parent was supported this way and was able to build their new family on a foundation consciously crafted without stress or shame, whether they were going back to work in an office, a restaurant, construction, their own business, or any kind of workplace. Think how strong our society would be.

This rosy future does not need to be hypothetical. Let's claim it as yours. *Just as expecting parents take birthing classes to understand and handle the challenges of labor, I will help you understand the basics of the parental leave transition so you can better prepare yourself, practically and emotionally, for your transition into life as a working parent.*

In this book we are going to lead you into your exciting new role and help you integrate it with your career plans and ambitions. With the right tools and support, I have seen (and helped) countless people do it well. Following the principles I'll outline in the following chapters, you will be able to maximize the upsides of your transition, sidestep pitfalls, and guide yourself and those around you through the rocky patches. You will have an easier time handing off your work, enjoy better communication with your boss and coworkers, gain more support at home, turn more thoughtful attention to the

bonding experience of your family, and enjoy a smoother transition and adjustment back to work.

You will also be well positioned to use what you have learned to educate and inspire those around you on how to approach parental leave, paving the way for parents who come after you to have an even better experience. When working parents are given the support they need to thrive, we improve society and our companies at every level. Making sure *you* get that support lays the foundation for that progress.

Before we continue, let's get clear on some definitions.

Language Matters: Defining Parental Leave

Inclusivity is vital to our workplaces and our society. In this book I am using the broadest definition of family and parenting in order to support *all* parents, across all races, religions, gender identities, and sexual orientations. I'm speaking to you no matter what method you have chosen to form a family, be it birth, adoption, surrogacy, fostering, or another creative way. Notice that the language and imagery customarily used for parental leave issues are still problematically heteronormative and skew toward assuming a traditional birth as the path to parenthood. (Even the terms *mom* and *dad* do not always adequately label trans or nonbinary parents.) My goal is to always be inclusive, but there are places where the language (and even my awareness) has not yet caught up with the evolution of family structure. Using inclusive language is a simple way to show we care for each other. Let's work together to help influence this culture shift, and let's also give each other grace and understanding when we aren't yet able to get it exactly right. *If you are becoming a parent, this book is for you.*

Next, we need to define the term *parental leave*. When most people hear these words, they still think of maternity leave: the time a mother (because let's admit it, dads are still largely ignored) is absent from work to be at home with her new baby and recover from childbirth. This is a very limited view that (unintentionally) reinforces prejudices and inequity and misses the bigger picture and the opportunities inherent in this major life transition. *Parental leave* describes any leave, inclusive of all gender identities, that provides time off from work to bond with a new child.

Using a time-based definition has proven to be holistic and productive for my clients. Therefore, let us define parental leave as an extended period of transition for all new parents in three phases: (1) preparing for leave, (2) during leave, and (3) returning from leave. This transition lasts roughly from the time you announce the upcoming arrival of your child through your return to work, and it also includes an indefinite period of adjustment after your return that can last anywhere from three to six months or longer. Altogether, we are talking about at least nine to 12 months—maybe more—of your life.

Although I have written this book with the idea that your parental leave will last longer than a few weeks, we will discuss aspects of this important transition that affect all expectant and new working parents, even those who are not taking leave at all.

Finally, the language I use in the book is geared toward people who are traditionally employed (those who work for a company or organization and have a boss over them) because that is still the majority of workers in the United States. However, these touchpoints are equally applicable to you if you are a freelancer, an entrepreneur, run a nonprofit, or do any other type of work. Even if you're not formally employed, you will still find value in thinking through how these touchpoints apply to your transition to parenthood. They are universal.

A Broken System: Parental Leave in the United States

At the time of this writing, most people in the United States do not have access to *paid* parental leave (in 2020, just 20% of US employees had access to paid family leave through their employer).¹ It is a common misconception that the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides paid leave. FMLA only allows for unpaid *job protection* for a specific period of time, if an employee meets certain criteria. It is estimated only 56% of the workforce is eligible for FMLA, which means the other 44% receive neither job protection nor pay.² Depending on your state, you may have paid leave through a state and/or local law. You also may be lucky enough to have an employer who voluntarily provides paid parental leave, which is a growing and welcome trend, especially among large companies. The companies I work with are forward-thinking and supportive of their

employees, but for most parents in the US, welcoming a child has a serious financial impact.

This is not a policy book and I won't go deeply into policy, but I will cover a few basics in the next section so that you are not caught off guard by anything you run up against. I've been reading the tea leaves on this issue for many years. I believe we are very close to federal legislation that will finally address this grievous oversight in our social safety net and economic infrastructure and help us catch up to almost every other country in the world. However, even with such long-overdue legislation, many challenges will remain—most of them related to perceptions and practices, not policies.

Note: Now is not the time for you to feel responsible for fixing our enormously flawed system (or to feel overwhelmed by it). Now is the time for you to focus inward on what *you* and *your family* need and fill your cup. In nourishing yourself in this way, you will ensure you come to the other side of your transition in a position of strength and awareness. Along the way, your success will help make it better for those who come next as, one family at a time, we heal our broken system.

When We Get Parental Leave Wrong

When we fail to support working parents with good policies and practices, the detrimental ripple effect is vast, yet we often fail to realize how profound it is because this is simply the way we do things in this country. As depressing as it may be, it is important for you to have a high-level understanding of how this systemic failure to properly support the parental leave transition affects us all.

- ***Working Families Suffer***

As if it were not enough that most parents lose wages while staying home to bond with a new child, many families who welcome a child by giving birth face exorbitant health care costs and inadequate health insurance. Big hospital bills hit just when paychecks shrink or temporarily disappear.

New parents are also at risk for mental health challenges during this period, regardless of their path to parenthood (birth, adoption, surrogacy, etc.). Many parents suffer in silence without ever getting proper care, fearing stigma or even that their children will be taken from them if they confess to a serious struggle.

When it is time to go back to work, they often need to seek and pay for infant childcare (and in many cases, care for older children), the *average* costs of which range from \$9,000 to \$24,000 per child per year for in-center care, depending on where you live.³ The cost to hire a private nanny can run even higher.

High childcare expenses often drive one parent to leave the workforce—or quit a more formal career in favor of work in the gig economy, which provides more flexibility but fewer (if any) benefits and often lower wages. In two-parent heteronormative relationships, most of the time, it is the mothers who stay home and care for the children, both because of caregiving stereotypes and because they often earn less. As a result, our workplaces and society miss out on their talent, and these women lose out on advancement opportunities, benefits, retirement savings, and more. The coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020 put even more pressure on working families, particularly mothers. In fact, according to the National Women’s Law Center, between February 2020 and January 2021, more than 2.3 million women, compared to nearly 1.8 million men, were pushed out of the labor force, meaning they were not working or looking for work.⁴ That’s over a half million more women than men.

These are tough circumstances by any measure, and many families face additional challenges if fertility, pregnancy, or birth are complicated and if mom or baby end up having medical issues. Some parents who have waited until their late thirties or early forties to have children may also join the “sandwich generation,” caring for their aging parents while also caring for young children *and* trying to work.

In Chapter 16 we will cover additional challenges such as those faced by single parents, those who belong to underrepresented and marginalized communities, LGBTQ+ parents, and more.

- ***Managers Are Left to Fend for Themselves***

Parents aren’t the only ones affected by the policy and practice vacuum concerning parental leave. Managers and supervisors face

serious challenges when one of their team members is planning to welcome a new child. Most companies lack a transparent process to let employees know what benefits are available to them, much less a standardized procedure to help them prepare to hand off their duties and pick them back up when they return. Managers are often left without resources to figure out how to juggle the workload and the tools needed to provide support to the new parent and cover team.

Furthermore, managers are not trained in what to say and how to say it. Many are afraid to say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing and sparking hurt feelings—or worse, a gender or pregnancy discrimination lawsuit. This moment could be a powerful opportunity to increase team trust and communication, provide support to new parents (thus boosting employee loyalty and retention), and grow junior staff members' skills during the coverage period. Instead, it is often handled so badly that it has all the opposite effects: communication fails, morale dips, and people quit.

- ***Companies Are Expected to Do the Work of Society***

When I decided to dedicate my career to helping parents through this transition, I was very thoughtful about the most efficient way to do it. The truth is that this is not parents' problem to solve. It's a *systemic* problem. One which today's companies are in a unique position to fix—and benefit from its solution. In part because the effort for a paid leave law was already well established and given my area of expertise in organizational development and executive coaching, I decided to focus the bulk of my efforts on companies, managers, and working parents. For many of us, financial stability and even self-esteem depend on gainful employment. A good boss can make or break the parental leave experience. (If you haven't yet heard someone say you've won or lost "the boss lottery," you will.)

I wanted to help companies understand the advantages for them in being supportive during this major life transition: an edge over their competitors when it comes to recruitment, better retention, increased growth of their female leadership pipeline, improved morale and productivity for working parents, and improved risk management, to name a few. Too many companies mistakenly categorize parental leave

as a one-way “benefit,” when in reality it needs to be seen as a *strategic opportunity* not to be missed for the whole organization.

Increasingly, leaders within organizations are coming around to this perspective. Starting in 2015 we began to see a spate of major US companies announcing generous parental leave benefits that were in line—or even more generous than—what many European countries offer. Microsoft, one of my company’s long-time clients, announced in 2015 that they would offer 12 weeks of 100% paid parental leave to all parents, in addition to the 8 weeks of maternity disability offered to birthing mothers. In making their expansion, Microsoft also realized that policy alone is not enough. Supporting practices must be put in place to require—and influence—culture change. We worked with Microsoft to develop a program that trains employees *and managers* around the world about how best to navigate the parental leave transition. They were the first company in the country to offer an employee-manager-aligned parental leave training and support program, a pilot so successful that it was rolled out globally.

Once I began working with companies on these issues, I realized how many challenges they face when it comes to parental leave. For example, beyond talent attraction, retention, and compliance issues, lack of a good leave policy also compounds risk management costs. If exhausted new parents come back to work too soon, they present an increased safety risk. AAA’s Traffic Safety Advocacy and Research department reported that “a driver who has slept for less than five hours has a crash risk comparable to someone driving drunk.”⁵ Imagine how a sleep-deprived new parent plays that out in the workplace, especially if heavy equipment or important decisions are involved. Having someone come back to work too soon increases health care costs and jeopardizes health and wellness initiatives. If people don’t get the time and support they need to heal and rest, their health suffers and insurance costs and absenteeism rates increase.

Ironically, the current trend of individual states passing paid leave can actually hurt companies, because those that operate in multiple states must keep track of and comply with many different (and complicated) laws. This adds a serious cost and administrative burden. I know many parents who couldn’t care less about this administrative burden (like Rachael in the introduction) and are simply angry not to have paid leave through their employer, but that frustration is misplaced.

This is something our federal government should be solving, not individual companies. According to the Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy, 99.7% of companies in the United States are small businesses.⁶ When we think of companies, we cannot just think of the Amazons and Googles of the world, with a sense of what they "owe" us.

Small businesses are affected more than larger businesses because larger companies can afford to offer paid leave benefits that attract the best talent, and the administrative costs that come with them. Small businesses often cannot. Even though in most states our current system doesn't legally obligate them to provide paid leave, there are other detrimental financial effects—such as having to pay to replace workers who leave after becoming a parent.

Although I see many companies fighting against the idea that parents should be supported with paid leave to take time away from work to welcome children, I think this is largely due to a lack of information on this issue. It is not easy being in leadership at a company of any size, and leaders often push back on anything that could cut into the bottom line and threaten the solvency or the day-to-day functioning of the company. However, forward-thinking leaders realize that supporting new parents through generous policies and strong support practices can literally pay dividends. It costs far more to recruit and train a new employee than it does to retain an existing one (the Society of Human Resource Management reports the cost of directly replacing an employee can run as high as 50% to 60% of their annual salary; total associated costs of turnover can range from 90% to 200% of an employee's annual salary).⁷ Last, studies show that parents who are healthy (and well rested!) are more productive, more innovative, and even more loyal to their company.⁸

Clearly, the best thing for families *and* companies would be a generous federal benefit that provides clarity and stability for everyone involved.

When We Get Parental Leave Right

There is a shortage of data about parental leave in the United States, but the data we do have from progressive organizations and other countries show that providing generous paid leave policies and supporting practices works. Let's look at some of the rewards of getting this right.

- ***Reward 1: Healthier Kids***

It may seem obvious to say that when parents are supported through the parental leave transition, they are able to better care for their children, which means better health outcomes for babies. The data support this: a 2017 study found that providing 12 weeks of paid leave in the United States could lead to 600 fewer infant and post-neonatal deaths each year.⁹ (In 2019, the infant mortality rate in the United States was 6 infants in 1,000 live births, twice that of the European Union, where health care and paid parental leave are widely available.)¹⁰ Breastfeeding (if desired) can be smoothly established and last longer. Parents have time to take their child to get vaccinations and checkups as well as notice any developmental delays when an early intervention can mean a better outcome. Everyone sleeps better and has time for the crucial bonding that we know leads to healthier kids (and parents).

- ***Reward 2: Healthier Moms and Birthing Parents***

Better supported parental leave also means better health outcomes for birthing parents. It's not just babies who suffer under the current state of things. The *maternal* death rate in the United States is actually on the rise, despite the global trend downward in the last few decades. In 2017, the United States saw 17 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.¹¹ The European Union saw just 6 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in the same year.¹² That's right, the maternal death rate in the United States is nearly *three times higher* than in the European Union and almost twice as high as in Canada.¹³ It's clear that birthing parents are not getting the care and support they need to thrive. Black moms and moms of color are disproportionately affected¹⁴ (more on this in Chapter 16). When moms are supported to take leave, they have the time and rest they need to recover more quickly and fully, and to get the treatment and screenings that prevent medical and mental health complications related to childbirth so they can return to the workforce more effectively.

- ***Reward 3: Healthier Dads and Non-Birthing Parents***

Although dads often face different issues than moms, it is important to highlight their transition. Dads often feel extreme pressure to “provide”

for their families, which can lead to overwork and a lack of self-care with serious health impacts. Dads and other non-birthing parents are not immune to perinatal mental health challenges, either. Research shows that 1 in 10 fathers experience depression and anxiety after their child is born.¹⁵ Often, they do not seek help until they are in crisis. Partners of a birthing parent often internalize any emotional or physical difficulties that their partner or child may encounter as a reflection on them and something that they need (and want) to fix. They can be left feeling inadequate and unsure of how to step into their critical role.¹⁶ When we look at outcomes in cases when dad gets paid leave and cultural support for time at home, we see how much it helps. For example, a study on a 2012 Swedish law that granted fathers more access to parental leave found that their partners' need for prescription anti-anxiety medications decreased by 26%.¹⁷ When dads take paternity leave they are more confident as parents, have better relationships with their partners, and are less likely to be separated or divorced for as many as six years later.¹⁸

- ***Reward 4: Healthier Relationships at Work and at Home***

When new parents have adequate time, space, and support during the transition to parenthood, it makes for healthier relationships in all spheres. At work, when communication is open and honest and leave planning is thoughtful and transparent, the relationship between the new parent and their manager (and often their team and HR) is strengthened. Team communication and trust as a whole improve when the handoff of duties is clear and well communicated and everyone understands their temporary role. Successful transitions can be used as a model for other teams in the organization and can become standard best practice. At home, parents can bond with their new child and—if there are two parents—with each other, to form equitable caregiving divisions that will prevent future strife and allow them to return to work with confidence that their home is a safe haven to refuel and restore.

- ***Reward 5: Gender Equity***

Averaged across all races, women still make only 82 cents for every dollar men make.¹⁹ Of S&P 500 companies, only 6% have women CEOs.²⁰

One of the biggest reasons that women have not yet achieved equity in the workplace is our cultural assumptions about who should be responsible for caregiving at home. Women are de facto caregivers and face bias, whether conscious or unconscious, that they are not as dedicated to their careers because of their current or possible future caregiving responsibilities. When men are empowered to be equal caregivers, not just through policy but through cultural messages, women will finally achieve full equity in the workplace and men will at home. I encourage all employers to offer gender-neutral parental leave and find ways to encourage all employees to take their full leave benefit. It may take time, but the more examples we have of men taking extended leaves to care for their children or other family members, the less we will punish women in terms of pay and opportunity for doing the same thing.

- ***Reward 6: Inclusion of All Types of Families***

Although we have made great (and long overdue) strides in this country to recognize and include all types of families, we have a long way to go. And though cisgender, heterosexual couples who have biological children represent the majority of family formations, it does no good to pretend that method of creating a family is somehow preferred or superior. Children, parents, and society as a whole will benefit when we recognize the value of all types of family compositions. No one benefits when certain parents or children feel marginalized. A future that welcomes all families is bright with the rich insights diversity brings.

You Are the Way Forward

If what you read in this chapter resonates with your own anxiety, I get it. I invite you to take a deep breath. You've got this. Reading this book means you are already ahead of the game. By learning the techniques in this playbook, you will have the tools and resilience you need to handle whatever comes your way. We cannot control the world or what life throws at us, but we can improve how we respond by deepening our emotional intelligence and practical skill set. Parenthood is the perfect opportunity to work on what you can control: your own knowledge, planning, communication, and attitude toward one of life's greatest adventures.