

Managing remote workers during quarantine: Insights from organizational research on boundary management

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abstract

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of employees find themselves working from home for the first time, and organizational leaders and supervisors are coping with the challenge of managing remote workers who are struggling to set and maintain a boundary between work and home life. Using an evidence-based management approach, we offer actionable insights into how managers can assess, create, and support work-from-home practices that address employees' daily boundary control needs and challenges effectively. Our assess–create–support framework provides a blueprint for how managers can establish and optimize psychological and time-related work–home boundaries to enhance remote workers' health, well-being, and performance.

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Although the ability to work from home (WFH) can offer numerous benefits to employees, research suggests that job performance worsens, job satisfaction decreases, and family-related problems occur when employees struggle to manage the boundaries between work and home.^{1–6} With the COVID-19 pandemic forcing millions of employees to work from home for the first time, the struggle has become more widespread—as is highlighted by news headlines such as “Work-Life Balance Is a Lie—and Coronavirus Is Exposing It.”^{7–10}

The pandemic is also adding to the standard challenges of working from home. Physical boundaries no longer separate work from home at all. Employees who formerly worked remotely only part time must now conduct all of their business in their personal spaces. Meanwhile, already remote workers no longer have the luxury of doing so from “third spaces,” such as coworking facilities or coffee shops.¹¹ In addition to the various ways that employees are required to adapt to the forced WFH setup, they also have to deal with the distracting presence of other family members—including children attempting to engage in virtual learning—during typical workday hours.^{12,13} Moreover, the work and home demands created by the COVID-19 pandemic are significantly distorting psychological and time-related boundaries between work life and home life. Employees are working up to three hours longer each day, experiencing the sensation of days blurring together, and expressing concern that employment and family obligations require as much time on weekends as they do on typical weekdays.^{14–16}

Existing WFH policies were not designed to either address or fully encompass the issues raised by the coronavirus pandemic. In this article, we propose an evidence-based management framework that focuses on how managers can help homebound employees create temporal and psychological boundaries that enable them to better structure their days and handle the social and psychological pressures that stem from being forced to work from home. We call our boundary management approach the *assess–create–support framework*.

Assess–Create–Support Framework

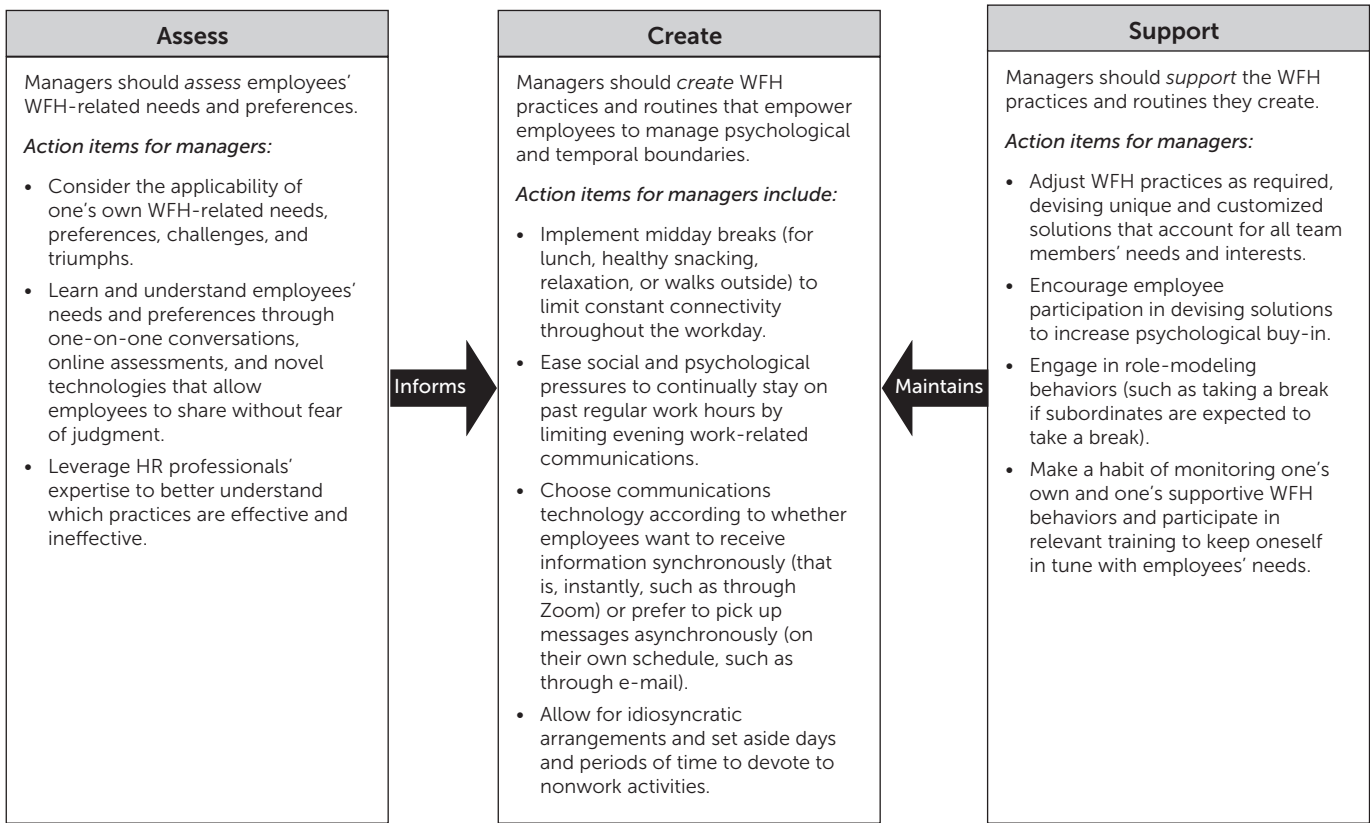
The success of the policies that organizations institute to enhance their employees’ well-being depends on two key factors: the degree to which managers—as gatekeepers—implement these policies and the degree to which this implementation meets employees’ needs.^{5,17–20} Our assess–create–support framework addresses both of these factors and is depicted in Figure 1. First, managers must assess employees’ needs and preferences so as to tailor WFH practices to address the demands created by the COVID-19 crisis. Second, managers should *create* practices that help delineate temporal and psychological boundaries for their employees. Third, managers must *support* these practices by championing their implementation. Below we describe this advice in detail and offer supporting evidence from recent research on internal organizational practices.

Assess

Research indicates that managers, with their wide-ranging and multiple responsibilities, may possess limited awareness of their employees’ needs related to work–life balance.²¹ The support that they provide for work–life balance is often informed by their own experiences with the issue: Managers with elder caregiving responsibilities, for instance, are more likely to grant their subordinates’ flexible scheduling requests, and organizations whose top management teams have children tend to offer more policies targeted to work–life balance.^{22–25} To begin the process of addressing their employees’ work–life balance issues, managers should identify the ways that their own WFH-related needs, challenges, and triumphs during this pandemic might offer insights into the experiences of their employees. But they should go further as well.

To avoid operating under the assumption that their experiences apply to everyone, managers should also collect and consider information from their employees about the demands being placed on them and about their ideas and preferences for solutions to the conundrums these demands create. Research suggests that

Figure 1. The assess–create–support framework for boundary management during (& after) the COVID-19 pandemic



Note. WFH = work from home; HR = human resources.

although some individuals are *separators* (who prefer to separate work and nonwork roles), others are *integrators* (who prefer to blend work and nonwork roles).²⁶ Given the unique challenges that employees might face during this crisis (such as having to manage school-age children and their education at home or provide care for a sick family member), it is especially important that managers become aware of and understand each employee's boundary management preferences and needs. For example, separators might require stringent boundary control to perform their best, whereas integrators might require increased flexibility.

One-on-one conversations certainly are the best means of understanding the unique situation each employee faces, but managers may well be strapped for time and resources, especially when they lead large teams. In such cases,

they may be able to leverage technological tools, such as online assessments (for example, the Center for Creative Leadership's WorkLife Indicator²⁷), to learn about their employees' specific circumstances. Insights might be gleaned as well through technologies that enable employees to share information about their challenges by communicating with an avatar of their leader—a potential option when employees are reluctant to speak directly with a manager about personal or family issues.²⁸

We also suggest that managers consult with their organization's human resources (HR) professionals to better understand existing WFH practices. Research indicates that HR professionals are better versed than most managers in the health and well-being benefits of WFH practices.²⁹ Moreover, they may be able to point to formal supports that current organizational

work–life balance policies can provide that managers are not aware of.¹⁸ Speaking with HR professionals can give managers a fuller, more holistic understanding of the organization’s WFH practices that can then be leveraged to maximize the benefits for their subordinates.

Create

On the basis of the information obtained in the assessment phase, managers can work with employees to tailor psychological and temporal boundaries between work and home that take into account differences in whether and how employees prefer to separate or integrate work and nonwork roles. We further recommend that managers encourage employees to take brief breaks, as convenient, at different points during the workday. Given that the stereotypical nine-to-five workday spills into night during this unprecedented time, manager-authorized breaks can enable employees to take time off from their computers and not feel guilty for doing so. In this way, managers can ease the psychological and social pressures that employees face to routinely stay on the job past regular work hours. Managers can urge employees to take breaks for eating lunch, snacking on healthy foods, doing relaxation exercises, or taking short (face-mask-protected) walks during the workday, given that research shows these activities help increase employees’ energy and reduce end-of-workday fatigue.^{30–32}

To reduce the psychological pressure to work longer days during the pandemic, managers can consider prohibiting or discouraging engaging in work-related communications after hours (at least for those employees who have not set up work-at-night arrangements with their supervisors).¹⁴ They must be careful to not signal a belief that subordinates’ sleep time is unimportant, as can be conveyed by sending work-related e-mails at 3 a.m.³³ Responding to or sending communications late at night can lead to feelings of depletion and can impair engagement the following day.³⁴ The effects of late-day communication can vary between individuals, though: Whereas integrators may be able to leverage after-hours contact to exercise greater flexibility in a healthy way, separators

are likely to struggle with their need to maintain separate work and home times when they feel pressure to work after hours.³⁵

Managers can address this challenge by implementing practices that offer compromise among the mixed preferences of their subordinates. For example, research suggests that asynchronous electronic communication (such as e-mail), which can be viewed at a recipient’s convenience, might be less invasive at home than synchronous electronic communication (such as face-to-face meetings conducted via Zoom or Slack video conferencing).^{36,37} Moreover, managers could consider varying their use of these tools to match the different needs of separators (with their desire for clear boundaries) and integrators (with their desire for flexibility).

We further encourage managers to consider setting aside entire days or chunks of time for employees to devote specifically to nonwork activities. For example, Google announced a company-wide holiday to encourage recovery from “coronavirus work-from-home burnout.”³⁸ When the work that managers supervise is not urgent, managers may be able to prohibit any work-related activities on weekends to better protect the psychological boundaries between employees’ weekdays and weekends.¹⁵ During weekdays, managers might also be able to work out idiosyncratic arrangements that provide individual employees with additional flexibility in their work schedules or that help to temporarily reduce their workload.^{23,39}

Support

Research suggests that the informal support provided by managers is more important than the formal support provided through organizational policies in influencing how employees achieve and maintain work–life balance.⁴⁰ Even after managers create the WFH practices discussed above, they should adjust the practices to optimize solutions on an ongoing basis, devising creative modifications that account for the best interests of all team members.⁴¹ One COVID-19-specific challenge involves managing employees whose school-age children are

attempting to attend school virtually.^{12,13} Instead of expecting an employee to take meetings while simultaneously overseeing a child's learning activities or expecting the employee to prioritize work when the child needs the employee's laptop for school, the supervisor can support the employee by adjusting daily schedules so that other team members cover for the individual during weekday morning hours. In exchange, the individual can provide coverage during, say, afternoon hours or on weekends (setting aside no-weekend-work rules if the employee prefers to take weekend hours). Indeed, research indicates that these types of creative solutions—particularly when employees participate in developing them—provide the most effective form of family-related supervisor support in terms of improving employees' physical health and job satisfaction.⁴²

Beyond adjusting and optimizing WFH routines, it is essential that managers model the recommended behaviors themselves. Supervisors' boundary management behaviors are witnessed and emulated by their subordinates.^{43,44} For the benefit of their subordinates, managers should practice what they preach even when doing so goes against their personal preference. For example, some managers like to skip lunch to enhance their productivity.^{45,46} However, if they establish a midday lunch break for their supervisees, then they, too, should take this break. Otherwise, the discrepancies between messaging and behaviors will confuse their supervisees and render WFH practices ineffective, as managers' behaviors are likely to trickle down to the people they supervise.^{47,48} This advice is particularly important during the current crisis, given that employees are isolated from other coworkers and might be forced to gauge which behaviors are normative at this time by closely attending to their supervisor's actions.

Finally, we urge managers to incorporate these supportive and constructive WFH behaviors into their daily routines. Research indicates that when managers monitor themselves and assess the degree to which they engage in supportive actions each day, their subordinates experience

better outcomes related to work–life balance, such as reduced work–family conflict, more positive work attitudes, and more time spent with children.^{49–51} In addition to tracking the ways that they support their employees through WFH practices, managers can also track the amount of time they themselves spend away from work-related communications in the evening and on weekends, so as to be mindful of and ready to adjust these behaviors. Organizational leaders can support these managerial efforts by developing computer-based training programs that incorporate specific organizational WFH policies and practices (including desirable WFH-supportive behaviors) or by providing behavior-tracking technologies that help supervisors monitor their own and their employees' boundary management behaviors—for informational purposes rather than for employee evaluations.^{52,53}

Conclusion

No one-size-fits-all solution will enable employees to effectively manage work–life boundaries each day. By applying the assess–create–support framework, however, managers can establish WFH policies and practices that enable them to collaborate with their employees to set customized psychological and time-related boundaries, giving the employees the combination of structure and flexibility they need to function well in both spheres. With the support of their managers, employees will feel empowered to establish their own routines for work–life balance within the new WFH reality. These arrangements will also benefit organizations because remote employees will be healthier (reducing absenteeism costs), happier (reducing turnover costs), and more productive (enhancing top-line growth) as well as more likely to stay with the employer both during the COVID-19 pandemic and after it passes.^{18,54,55}

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