Professional Development: A Leadership Guide for Working Parents

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Alyssa Westring has been researching work-life balance for 18 years, since before she became a parent. Now an associate professor of management in the Driehaus College of Business and a mother of two, Westring thinks a lot about the advice her mother gave her when she was growing up. You can have it all, she told Westring. You can have a career and be a go-getter and do anything you want to do.
“In college I was surrounded by incredible, driven women who wanted to have careers but who also wanted to have a family and a life, and I saw my generation, my peers, confused and worried about how they were going to make both happen successfully,” she says. “I started to wonder: how do we create a life where we can have career success but also be parents, be healthy and be involved in our communities?”

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This question took Westring to graduate school, where she studied organizational psychology and researched anticipated work-family conflict—how people think about future challenges they might face in their careers and family lives and how that thinking influences their career choices.

“I was doing exciting research, but I wanted it to help people and not just live in an academic bubble,” she says. “That’s when I reached out to Professor Stewart Friedman at the University of Pennsylvania. He was doing groundbreaking work at the time bridging leadership development and work-life integration. I started working with him on his research and have been working with him ever since.”

Westring has served as director of research at Friedman’s company, Total Leadership, for more than 15 years, conducting research on leadership principles and how they can apply to all aspects of life, not just careers. Their work together recently culminated in the co-authoring of “Parents Who Lead: The Leadership Approach You Need to Parent with Purpose, Fuel Your Career, and Create a Richer Life.” Published in March 2020 by Harvard Business Review Press, the book takes the fundamentals of effective leadership and applies them to working parents.

“It’s essentially a guidebook,” Westring explains. “We created a framework for how to take a leadership approach to being a working parent and how that can enhance your performance at work, your parenting at home and make you happier and healthier all around.”

The book includes research and stories about working parents—single, dual-career, one working full time and the other part time—and provides activities and exercises that engage readers in implementing the book’s tools for daily life.

“A lot of the advice parents find or receive about work-life balance is based on the personal experiences of other people. I wanted to give advice based on research,” Westring says. “I feel I have a unique voice as a mom who has access to important research that can benefit busy parents.

“Stew [Friedman] and I are parents at different phases in our lives, and we are from different genders and generations, which all contributes to making this a well-rounded book for empowering both mothers and fathers.”

Westring has these three leadership tips for working parents—and anyone else—to thrive in their careers and at home:

1. CREATE A SHARED VISION WITH YOUR PARENTING PARTNER.

We know from decades of research that good leaders have a vision for the future that’s based on their values. Talk to your co-parent, whether a spouse or another person helping you raise your child, and get on the same page with them about what you want your life to look like over the next 10 or 20 years. Your personal life and professional life don’t happen in a vacuum—one will always affect the other—so think about the values-driven choices you’re making and how those choices will bring you toward a future you want.

2. COMMUNICATE YOUR VISION WITH PEOPLE WHO CAN SUPPORT YOU.

A good leader always gets people excited about their vision. Once you determine your vision, communicate it to the people around you so they can support you. If you can’t get people on board with what you’re aspiring to do, you will work twice as hard to get where you want to be, and that’s if you get there at all. Building a community of support will help open doors for you, push you when you need that extra push and keep you accountable to creating the life you want to lead.

3. DON’T BE AFRAID TO TRY NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS.

Good leaders know that one size does not fit all when it comes to finding the best route to success. If one route isn’t working for you, experiment with new ways to achieve your goal. Don’t give up or get discouraged. Cultivate a mindset of “keep trying” and eventually you will come across a way that matches your values and helps you feel more successful in life.