



Flexibility ain't easy

The idea of “flexibility” has become a proud flag flown atop just about every company in corporate America. But what is flexibility? In my mind, flexibility is placing value on the needs of your team and employees and recognizing that those needs must be balanced with the needs of the company/project. Those needs will vary from person-to-person, project-to-project and may even change as “things” come up in the lives of your team members. Flexibility requires us to place value on those “things.”

Flexibility is a commitment that, although we are all here to do a job, work on a project or accomplish a task, we each have personal needs that – when valued by our managers and team members – help us perform better. Contrast the work environment of today’s leading flexible companies to the rigid organizations deaf to its employees’ individual needs and it is easy to see why flexibility has become the cornerstone of the cultures of leading companies.

Yet, for managers and team leaders, maintaining flexibility among team members and employees can feel like a game of tug-o-war between the needs of the company [or project in cases where managers are overseeing projects] and the needs of the employee [or team member if it is a project]. On the one hand you have the goals and objectives of the company that require us to prioritize the organization first.

Phrases like “mission critical,” “at all costs,” and “whatever it takes” encourage employees to put their needs in the back seat while the company rides shotgun. On the other hand you have needs of the employee with personal commitments like kids’ soccer practice, training events, girlfriends/boyfriends/spouses and the slew of other priorities vying for their precious time. So, which one wins?

That’s easy and it’s not even a close race: personal life and the needs of the employee wins out every time.

But does it really have to be a choice?

Managers and team leaders must recognize that the needs of their people come first and it does not have to be at the expense of the company. It does require us all to think differently, act differently and operate differently. Instead of a 9-to-5 workday, what about 10-to-4 and then 8-to-10? Instead of mandatory in-person meetings, what about virtual meetings and conference calls? The list goes on... And it is typically best populated by your team members by soliciting opinions about what they need to be successful. It comes down to the simple premise that teams operate better when they are happy (i.e. not forced to choose between a paycheck and their happiness).

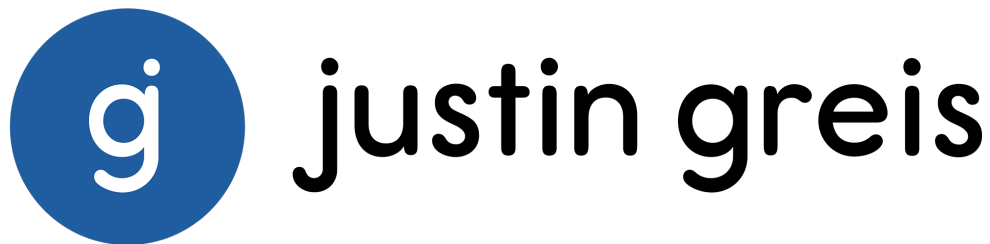
But if that’s the case, how do we actually get stuff done? How do we give our people the flexibility to attend to their personal commitments while still delivering on our professional promises?

It starts with the recognition that, although flexibility is important, it ain’t easy. It takes effort and compromise all around. Effort on the part of the manager to change and flex his/her style to accommodate the needs of the team. And effort on the part of the employee to uphold his/her end of the flexibility contract. Flexibility does not necessarily mean the conditions established between manager, team and employee are easy. In fact, by comparison some “flexible” arrangements are difficult and require getting up early, staying up late and cutting into coveted personal time to meet a deadline, but in

doing so, it gives the employee what he/she needs to do his/her job better. This kind of compromise yields – in my experience – higher performance, better morale, more creativity, innovation and a better quality deliverables (just to name a few benefits). When we recognize what each of us need to succeed as individuals, it benefits the team and organization as a whole. And while companies implement policies that promote flexibility, it is ultimately up to us as managers to make those policies real for our teams.

So, although flexibility ain't easy, it is well worth it!

How do you make flexibility real for you and your teams?



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(nice to meet you)

I post weekly **professional insights** and **personal stories** from my life as a management consultant, a dad, and an eternal optimist.



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