


# PARENTHOOD + A PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP POSITION

Around 85% of employees become parents at some stage, mostly occurring when people are in their 30s. As if this transition isn't sufficiently challenging, this is often precisely the time when people take on more senior leadership positions.


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Part of  
leading a healthy  
and sustainable  
workforce is supporting  
employees to have a full  
and meaningful life  
outside of work  
as well

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**T**he transition to parenthood is neither a women's issue or a leadership issue. It is an issue relevant to us all.

Raising families and looking after a healthy workforce is a community responsibility.

People of all genders have their own challenges in thinking about and starting a family. The demands of leadership vary and people have their own journey through the transition to parenthood. That said, it is important to think carefully about how parenthood impacts women compared to men. For women starting a family brings very specific and personal challenges: fertility treatments, pregnancy, childbirth and caring for a newborn. This work requires personal, physical and emotional labour. While many women who undertake this work have support from partners, family and friends, some women do not have such support.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE TRANSITION

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In my leadership coaching work, I have worked with many people at various stages in this transition. For example, pregnant women about to go on parental leave and fathers wanting to extend time out of the workforce to look after their children.

A crucial aspect of these mini-transition points within parenthood is working out one's identity, and how that identity includes both professional and family elements.

In many ways this is about the new story you are creating for yourself. "I also want to be a parent" can be a seismic shift. It's moving the tectonic plates of who you are and how you see yourself, and likely this happens very privately first. Getting comfortable with different and sometimes competing priorities is important personal work. It's part of crafting a personal and professional narrative that makes sense of why you are doing what you're doing.

Traditionally these have not been questions on the leadership agenda – this work has been relegated to 'private life', and raising a family usually relegated to the sidelines and to outside the professional realm. Things are changing. People going through all life stages and experiences should be supported to be part of the workforce.

## *I am transitioning to parenthood*



We need to support each other at various life stages, whether this be caring for others or caring for ourselves

### THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU NEED

Think about what has changed in your situation and the implications these changes might have on how you work. For example, in a transition to parenthood there are specific things that may need accommodation, for example:

- » Attending medical appointments
  - » Needing more rest times or short breaks
  - » Time off for sudden, unexpected events
- Think about what changes might be helpful and supportive for your needs now, even though these may change over time.

### DECIDE ON WHAT TO COMMUNICATE AND SHARE WITH COLLEAGUES

Private and sensitive information can feel hard to share. Not all colleagues and workplaces may be supportive. Navigating lack of knowledge and stigma around pregnancy and family is still very real.

Thinking about what you want to tell others is about creating and managing boundaries. For example, "Do I need to tell my boss why I have medical appointments?" Perhaps it feels right to simply say, "For health reasons I need to attend a few extra appointments this month." This is personal and there is no right answer. Think about what you are comfortable sharing and find the right words to share and manage these boundaries.



### FIND AND PRACTICE THE RIGHT LANGUAGE TO USE

Think about who you might share with, along with when and why. Building literacy for your situation is important. This transition is a new place, and we are usually not adept at talking about these things at work. It can feel difficult and even inappropriate for some people. Some workplaces might still not be good at these conversations either – so it might be challenging. Individuals beginning this transition can feel vulnerable for many reasons. It can feel immensely vulnerable being pregnant or trying to be pregnant, and there can be difficult and confronting stereotypes around women, family and career. Figuring out who you will share your information with, when and why can be a positive first step.

### BUILDING NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

While you might not share everything straight away, sharing something with one or two colleagues who you trust provides powerful support at work. So, think carefully about your colleagues. Who do you trust to share something this personal? Who can support you – as a role model, mentor or ally? Who would be willing to support navigating a period of leave and more flexible work arrangements – especially if this is not well accepted in your workplace?

Support outside of work is also helpful – friends, family, online groups and forums. It can be supportive to hear and share stories with others in similar situations. This is especially true in the event of trauma. The coming of children is usually assumed as a time of joy but sometimes these events can also be traumatic or challenging. It can be helpful to be with and talk to people who have been in the same place, as difficult as that is.

*I am a leader supporting a team*

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Leaders are looking to step up and support their employees to ensure that life outside work is supported and sustainable  
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**CHECK YOUR SELF: WHAT ARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES AND POTENTIAL BIAS?**  
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If you have experienced the transition to parenthood, this will likely inform how you think about it and navigate it with others. Were you able to share the challenges of this transition at work? Was your workplace supportive? What were the positive and negatives aspects of the experience for you? If we can be aware of our past experiences and how they impacted us; and we know the assumptions or biases we bring to the workplace, we are better placed to positively support our team members.

**RESPECT PRIVACY + CONFIDENTIALITY**  
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As managers, we are interested in our colleagues and their career intentions. These are relevant to leadership pipelines and workforce planning. It's also important to be mindful of the boundaries between personal and professional life, and what is in and out of bounds. Strong professional relationships are best served when leaders are engaged and caring, but also able to hold their role and not intrude into personal matters. Know that your team members will share more with you if they can trust that you will respect privacy and confidentiality, and not push for more information.

**ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY NEED**  
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Your responsibility is to look after your team and ensure that the work of the team is done effectively and efficiently. Creating a psychologically safe workplace is part of this work. Asking people what they need from you is an open and supportive way to communicate that you care. Ask yourself – do I think my team feels comfortable to talk to me about sensitive issues and ask for support when they need it?

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS IN TERMS OF WORKPLACE PRACTICES + POLICIES**  
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Workplace policies, especially flexibility, can go a long way in supporting employees navigating challenging times. Oftentimes there can be small 'tweaks' to someone's work set-up and responsibilities that can support different needs – such as the transition to parenthood – over a relevant timeframe. Workplaces are required to comply with any Enterprise Agreement and Fair Work Act entitlements but may also have policies that add to these entitlements for flexible work work from home and various types of leave and while the transition from parenthood doesn't fit this list these types of leave can provide a relevant framework.

- Other flexible work arrangements include:
- » Time off for appointments
  - » Working from home / reduced hours (If this could be negotiated for a fixed period for part of the role, however for many clinical roles this can be difficult to support).
  - » Temporary change to role and responsibilities
- When we are supporting people in challenging situations, and providing accommodations for a team member, we need to be flexible and innovative. We can frame ideas and suggestions in terms of a trial period that will be reviewed.

We want team members to talk to us about what they need to do their work well. We don't want them withdrawing, taking sick leave or leaving a job or the profession because they feel they can't do it without those conversations. Sometimes a desired or ideal solution won't be possible, but that doesn't mean it can't be put on the table and considered. Solutions come from open discussions, and a diversity of perspectives, knowledge and opinions. We need a healthy, diverse workforce including parents and carers. Our leadership toolbox needs a strong set of skills to support life transitions.  
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