

WHAT IF...

By Sheila Warnock

I just got off a call with a friend whose sister recently suffered a stroke. This would be cause enough to stress out, but add to the mix that her sister lives in the mid-west and she is on the east coast. Overnight she was thrust into the role of a long-distance, working caregiver.

After her initial visit to the ICU, she said “the hardest part was having to leave my sister, unsure if she could hear me say *“I love you and I am coming back.”* *“It was so hard getting on that plane. I didn’t even know if she was going to make it.”*”

Fortunately, her sister did pull through and now her friends are rallying to form a Share The Care group when she leaves rehab to go home.

However, that will not be the end of it for this working caregiver. There will be more visits to speak with doctors, and therapists. The stroke has left her sister in need of speech therapy, and physical therapy. No one is sure how things will turn out except to say *“nothing will ever be the same.”*

Complex responsibilities will continue to rest on the shoulders of this caregiver for some time and possibly forever. She will surely face complicated decisions and jobs ahead to support her sister while struggling to meet the demands of her own job and family as well as to keep her own health in tact.

These are some of the challenges of just one caregiver in the corporate world. There are an estimated 43.5 million other adults in the US who are also unpaid caregivers. In fact, 6 in 10 of those caregivers are employed.

Today many corporate settings now offer Employee Assistance Programs, flex time, telecommuting, shift-exchange, a temporary reduction of work hours, vouchers for services, information and more. Yet, we’ve got to do one better because our aging population is due to double in the next 15 years. And being a caregiver as well as holding down a job will become our new normal.

This got me thinking. Imagine if my friend had a **“Share The Work”** Team to provide back up when she needs to travel back to the mid west. Knowing that her most critical work responsibilities were covered could cut her anxiety levels while she is out of the office and allowing her to be totally present to do what is needed for her sister.

Share The Care™ has been adapted to work for a vast variety of circumstances and challenges. The model teaches people about Teamwork, solving problems and sharing responsibilities. And isn’t that what we are supposed to be doing in the workplace? Working as a TEAM.

Imagine a corporate culture that encouraged mini “Share The Work” Teams.

These teams could benefit caregiver employees as needed and because over time more and more employees will find themselves needing to take on that role it makes sense. Working caregivers might begin to feel less pressured to hide the fact that he or she is a caregiver.

Think about it. Check out the Share The Care™ model. (see: www.sharethecare.org) Invite five or six colleagues to brainstorm how you might break down five or six critical assignments in such a case. One person could cover an important client meeting. (They would need to be briefed for the meeting and about the client.) Another could make sure a project in progress moves forward without delays. Someone else could take on that special research requested by the supervisor.

By sharing responsibilities the chances of something major falling through the cracks is lessened without burdening any one on the team.

Look at our **Share The Care™ The Seven Principles© for Group Caregivers** as your guidelines and apply them to a “Share The Work Team.”

- 1. Sharing responsibility is key to not burning out.**
- 2. Know your limits and stick to them.**
- 3. It won't work unless everyone gains something personally.**
- 4. There is no one right way to do.**
- 5. Anyone who wants to help should be encouraged.**
- 6. Trust the group: support each other.**
- 7. Keep your own life in good working order.**

Who knows what could happen...”Share The Work” Teams could just become part of our corporate culture in the future.