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Family-friendly Leadership

The podcast by the Office of the University Women's Representative

Episode 2: **Prof. Dr. Helga Stopper**

*Welcome back to **Family-Friendly Leadership**, our WÜkit podcast, which is all about reconciling family and career at JMU. In this episode, we are joined by Professor Dr. Helga Stopper, who currently holds the position of University Women's Representative. She also leads a research group at the Institute of Pharmacology and Toxicology focusing on genetic toxicology. As the University Women's Representative, she has a particular interest in gender equality and family-friendly policies. Prof. Dr. Stopper is also committed in bringing further diversity projects into university life. We look forward to her exciting insights and hope everyone enjoys listening!*

Natalie Nikolaus (Office of the University Women's Representative): We are pleased to welcome Professor Dr Helga Stopper to our interview. She is also the current university women's representative and has agreed to talk to us on the topic of family-friendly leadership. Welcome to our podcast interview. (01:11)

Prof. Dr. Helga Stopper: Thank you very much. I am delighted to be part of the series.

NN: Let's get started right away. You were recommended to us as a family-friendly manager. Could you perhaps give us some insights into how you make it easier for your employees to balance academia and family life? (01:31)

HS: Yes, I'd be happy to. So, this is related to my work in the Toxicology Department at the Institute. We do scientific work there, which involves laboratory experiments. This means that working from home is only possible to a very limited extent. However,

employees can plan their work flexibly and independently, which allows them to take time off for important appointments, such as those involving important events for their children. I must say, however, that we do not have any patient responsibilities at our institute, which of course allows us high degree of flexibility.

NN: Yes, it takes a certain kind of mindset to develop a family-friendly management style. What do you think is the most important aspect of this approach? (02:21)

HS: I think the most important thing is simply to have a positive outlook on the fact that scientists also have families or want to start a family. So not just superficial congratulations, but a genuine acceptance of it as something good.

NN: In other words, always taking people into consideration.

HS: Yes, of course. And just to genuinely believe that it's a wonderful thing when someone starts a family here, and that it doesn't have any negative impact on the working environment but rather enriches it.

NN: There are employees with families, which is something you welcome when they are part of your team, as we just heard. But there are also employees who may not have families. This can result in challenges within the team in terms of ensuring that everything runs smoothly. In your opinion, which is the biggest challenge in reconciling the interests of all employees? (03:20)

HS: Yes, at the moment I don't have any cases like that, no similar problems. But of course, it can happen, because there are posts or tasks where work has to be done on weekends, where the experimental procedures require that certain periods have to be covered at the weekend or in the evening. And if you then exempt one group of people from this, then the others have to cover for them. And that can, of course, seem unfair or perhaps even be unfair. All I can say is that you have to look for solutions on a case-by-case basis, sit down with the team and talk about how to find a good solution for everyone.

NN: So communication among colleagues is very important. And speaking of communication, young scientists often have certain hesitations about approaching their managers when it comes to family-related issues. What would you recommend

scientists in terms of how they can or should approach their managers and how they should articulate their concerns? (04:25)

HS: I would recommend providing clear information to your manager about how you imagine your future. In other words, I would recommend seeking a conversation if the situation is urgent, but only if it is urgent. Before that, what you plan and think is nobody else's business. Then seek a conversation with your manager and discuss how you imagine your future. How long do you want to be away completely? Would part-time work be an option? How do you plan to keep in touch? For example, would it be possible to attend group seminars or research group seminars to keep in touch? With this openness and with such a conversation, you can also give your manager the chance to plan in a way that is best for the whole team and also for the future of the person concerned.

NN: Would you perhaps see gender-specific differences, i.e. in terms of approach, or have you had any experience regarding their needs? Are they gender/specific? (05:31)

HS: I don't really have much experience in this area, so I can't say. But there shouldn't really be any gender-specific differences. The responsibility for care work should be shared equally between both sexes. And I think that's also an extremely important factor in finally achieving true equality at some point. But still, in reality and at the moment, mothers are often still the ones who have to step in when things get tight. The child is sick, both parents have appointments, who stays at home or cancels their appointment? Okay, so in the laboratory, there is still a clear difference in terms of safety during pregnancy and during maternity leave and breastfeeding. This really only affects mothers and not fathers. But this can often be resolved quite easily without the expectant mother needing to take a complete break from her work. And even in this case, it is important that the restrictions for the expectant mother during this phase are understood as a shared responsibility of both parents, or rather of the women and men in the team. It's also a fact that men nowadays want to be more involved in family life. And we need to give them the opportunity to do so, to create an environment that makes it possible for them to take on equal responsibility. And this outdated idea that mothers or fathers are no longer as productive or no longer want to or are unable to pursue a career really needs to be set aside now.

NN: That sounds very equitable, and that is the direction we are heading in. We also hear about the needs of younger academics and younger people here at the office of the University Women's Representative. We have now heard that you definitely provide support when it comes to family-related demands or needs. How can other contact points at the university provide support, either to you or to the people involved? What would you like to see happen? (07:38)

HS: Yes, what we already provide quite well are childcare services, also during holiday periods, and services that are as flexible as possible. You just have to keep checking to see if you can improve the offers or make them even more flexible. But we're already in a very good state here at our university. Perhaps I could add something else that is very important, based on my own experience, and that involves family rooms. In other words, rooms where it is possible to take children if the daycare centre calls early in the morning to say that the child has somehow caught a cold and needs to be picked up, so that you can take the child there if you have no other option at that moment. And then you can still get certain things done at work, even though you have to take the child with you, in an emergency. So that is certainly a great help. Otherwise, one could perhaps say that in cases where the workplace does see problems and does not adopt a family-friendly approach, support from our office of the University Women's Representative could be provided by talking to the people involved and perhaps by reaching a good solution after all. That might be another area where we can offer support. And, of course, networks are crucial. It is important to refer to networks and role models so that those affected do not feel alone. I believe that is also very important in this situation, at this point in time.

NN: We definitely want to do more in this area, and hopefully more opportunities will become available, including for those affected themselves. Once again, it is clear to see that your management style is very family-friendly. Can you explain how your management style has developed in such a way that it promotes work-life balance? (09:32)

HS: That's quite easy to answer. My own experience. It was simply when my own children were young and I experienced it first-hand and learned what it was like. And I must say that, although it was quite a while ago, I experienced a relatively positive, family-friendly

environment at that time, and I am very grateful for that. And that encouraged me to make it possible for other young parents as well, if it is within my power to do so.

NN: Why would you recommend other managers to adopt a family-friendly approach? Do you see any advantages, or what advantages might there be? (10:14)

HS: Well, that's simply the right thing to do. There's no need to discuss that at all. But apart from that, this competition for skilled workers has also affected the scientific community. People often have difficulty filling positions adequately. And then you simply can't do without people for reasons that shouldn't be reasons at all.

NN: Are there any guidelines or measures within the academic system in Bavaria or Germany that tend to promote family-friendly behaviour or perhaps also have a restrictive effect? (10:48)

HS: Yes, fundamentally, the large number of fixed-term contracts is of course a problem. But also, the low pay and the associated, perhaps mostly perceived, necessity of renegotiating contracts are also very family-unfriendly mechanisms. Because even at the age of 40, highly educated people with young families still have to prove that they are good enough to get their contracts extended. Young families have to constantly expect that they will have to change their surroundings again. Unfortunately, as the university's women's representative, I still hear over and over again that young female scientists hide their pregnancies for as long as possible in this context because they are afraid for their future. All these circumstances can cause massive existential fears and sometimes lead to people postponing starting a family or deciding not to have children at all. Sadly, this is particularly true for women. There are significantly more female professors without children than male professors. Unfortunately, however, managers are often unable to do anything about this directly, even with the best will in the world, because it is not within their power to offer better conditions.

NN: So, you find it rather restrictive, I would say, in terms of the system. But perhaps there is a best practice university or a country where you say, that would be great if it were like that here. (12:21)

HS: So, any university that makes it possible to create more permanent positions for young scientists through any kind of programme is on the right track. It's not as if every person who does scientific work, who does a PhD and then perhaps a post-doc, is necessarily working towards a professorship, at least not directly. We also need permanent positions that involve, for example, a higher proportion of organisational tasks such as the organisation of lectures or in science management. This would give young scientists security in this important phase of their lives when they are starting a new family and would still leave the path to a professorship open. However, I can say that a lot is actually happening at our university at the moment. A rethink or cultural change is taking place in many areas. But it will take time for this to reach every corner, every institute and every mind.

NN: So, you see our university as being on the right track, but perhaps you have a wish you would like to express to the university management or politicians regarding improving the compatibility of academia and family life. (13:36)

HS: I actually think our university is on a very good path, and my wish would simply be for it to continue along this path with motivation and enthusiasm, which is what I am currently experiencing and seeing, but for it to actually continue like this permanently. And then, I believe, we will make great progress in terms of equality, even if it simply takes time. I'm relatively impatient, everything always takes a little too long for me, but the fact is that we have already made good progress in recent years.

NN: That certainly sounds very positive, at least for the situation here in Würzburg. Then I would like to thank you very much for your valuable time and your honest answers. Thank you very much. (14:19)

HS: Thank you for inviting me.

That was our informative conversation with Prof. Dr. Stopper on family-friendly leadership, equality and the need for permanent positions at the university. For more information on the topic of reconciling family and career, take a look at the WüKit website or contact us at: ***unifrauenbeauftragte@uni-wuerzburg.de****. Be sure to visit the website*

of the university's women's representative and take advantage of the offers. Interested in a specific topic? Or do you have an opinion on the podcast topics? Just send us a message! Many thanks to all our listeners for tuning in – see you next time!