



Where's the "Life" in Work/Life Balance? by Ed Maier

Recently, I had the opportunity to address a group of women business executives on the elusive topic of work/life balance. I used the title above because that seems to be a regular issue in discussions with my coaching clients—plenty of work, but no life to balance.

There is no given or accepted definition for the subject, but the thoughts of two of our former colleagues—Deb DeHaas and Deb Kiley-- offered the following taxonomy. The most familiar term employs the word "balance". *Balance* implies a state of equilibrium or equipoise; an equal distribution of weight, amount, etc. A second generation term has been described as work/life "blending". *Blending* means to mix smoothly and inseparably together; to mix in order to obtain a particular kind or quality. But the fallacy in "balance" is that you struggle to proportion things equally. If you "blend", you mix things together but in doing so you lose the unique identity of the original ingredients. A final term, not yet popular (but who knows...?), is *Weaving*. You "weave" by combining various elements or details into a connected whole. The combining parts or threads retain their originality, but create a more tensile result. (I wish to thank Dictionary.com for my definition sources).

But, a standard definition is not important. What is important is what this means to you--whether you are male or female, young or less young, associate or executive. If you want to achieve some definable work/life state, you must seek it and work at it for yourself. No one will do it for you. No one else will make this happen. Believe it or not, you are in control.

To begin, start at the beginning. Develop a plan. In pursuit of your life you have often had some planning experience. Use it. Define what this work/life conundrum means for you. As you do so, focus on the future. What is your vision? What is important to you in your life, in your work? Consider your beliefs, family, friends, church, community, society, politics, personal well-being (spiritual, mental, physical), career progression, the nature of the work you would like to do, etc. Set a time frame to measure your progress, assess where you are, identify the gaps and plan executable steps to close the gaps. As you set goals remember the Management 101 acronym—**SMART**. Goals should be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-framed.

Once you are ready, discuss your plans with those close to you. Start in the home and within your circle of friends. Incorporate their input into your plan. Allow them to hold you accountable for your committed, actionable steps. Regularly dialogue with them on how you are doing.

Then take your plans to the workplace. Understand your organization's policies and modify your plan accordingly. Discuss them with your mentor or coach, your human resources support, your boss and your team. Respect and appreciate their concerns; be flexible and compromise, but do not compromise beyond your acceptable limits. Then begin to execute your plan. Each of your plans and action steps will be different. As I prepared my presentation, several friends and colleagues offered tips to help:

- Take your spouse on a date, your child to work or your spouse or child on a business trip.
- Schedule "take-it-home" work around your family activities and responsibilities.
- Turn your phone/PDA/laptop off at certain specific times; use technology to enable, not disable.
- Encourage teams to deal with individual issues together; don't try to solve all of their problems yourself.



- “Run with your son” or “Hit the water with your daughter.”
- Outsource certain chores.
- Schedule “down time” for yourself.

As you dialogue with others, practice good communication skills. Show that you care for them. Be a good listener. Give and receive honest feedback. Be flexible, but know your boundaries and stick to them. Understand and manage your emotions. Above all, think straight and talk straight.

As you embark on this journey, consider the following:

- Know your behavior style. It affects everything you do—how you think, how you communicate, how you learn, how you grow and develop. Modify your behaviors as appropriate.
- There are only 24 hours in every day. You get the same total as everyone else--no more, no less.
- Ed’s Add and Subtract Rule* – as you add items to your life and work “plates”, you have to subtract others. When you take on additional roles and responsibilities, you grow and develop. When you pass along (or delegate--to use the accepted leadership term) roles and responsibilities to others, you help them grow and develop.
- Sharpen your time management skills. If your abilities to organize your life are hindered by poor skills in this area, you will not succeed.
- No matter what you think, you can’t do it all, you can’t have it all, and you are not entitled to it all.
- Economic times today are nastier than they have been in my lifetime and, I trust, in yours. But, there is no better time to start than the present. Begin to develop your plan. You cannot control everything, so control what you can.
- Recognize the effect of stress on your life and redouble your efforts to care for yourself—exercise, take stress breaks, meditate, read, listen to your favorite music, etc.
- Also remember that if your plans won’t work “here”, you may have to define a new “there”.

While researching my presentation, I found a very appropriate quotation on the topic. It is attributed to Brian Dyson the CEO of Coca Cola Enterprises from 1959-1994. I want to share it with you here: “Imagine life as a game in which you are juggling five balls in the air. You name them— work, family, health, friends and spirit. And you’re keeping all of these in the air. You’ll soon understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. But the other four balls – family, health, friends, and spirit are made of glass. If you drop one of these, they will be irrevocably scuffed, marked, nicked, damaged, or even shattered. They will never be the same. You must understand that and strive for balance in your life”.

In closing, remember who comes first in your life. You do. Don’t forget your need to grow and develop – physically, mentally and spiritually. You can best take care of others or fulfill your myriad of responsibilities if you first take care of yourself. And, remember there is no “silver bullet” as you balance or blend or weave.

As always, I am interested in your thoughts and feelings about this topic. Feel free to share them by writing me at Ed@ThinkStraightTalkStraight.com.