



Work-Life Balance... What's the Real Problem?

By Mike Cook

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There has not been a single managers' workshop I have conducted over the past four years where the issue of "Work-Life Balance" has not come up by noon on the first day. When it surfaces, it is endorsed by a chorus of agreeing groans from almost everyone in the workshop. What is the big deal here?

I have to admit, this seems to be more of a problem for managers than others employed in my client companies. When I walk through a client's offices after 5 pm, it is often the managers who are still there. Everyone else seems to have had someplace else to be. What is going on here? Are these the martyrs among us? Do we have the wrong people in manager roles? Do managers have no lives other than work?

Or Maybe the Problem is Not What it Appears to Be...

Before I started writing this article, I did a quick Internet search for articles on the topic of "Work-Life Balance." There were plenty of responses to my query. A quick scan of the listings showed that *Fast Company* has a lot to say about this subject. I noted that there were 461 entries on "Work-Life Balance" going back to 1992! At least half the entries had titles like "My Name is Tony and I am a Workaholic." In all, there were 230 articles. Over 15 years, this averages to about 15 articles per year in one of the premier publications covering developments in our work places. That's a lot of coverage! Recently though, the pace of articles on the topic does appear to have slowed. I have a theory about this trend. First, let's define what we're talking about.

Since "Work-Life Balance" is a topic that will just not go away, we'll define it as a **co nun drum**. Giving the issue a catchy label seems a great place to start finding a solution. My very current online edition of *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* offers the following as one definition of the label I am suggesting:



Conundrum: *noun*, (Entry 3b) a puzzle or problem that is usually intricate and difficult of solution.

“Work-Life Balance” is a problem and there is no easy solution. Sounds right, yes? This seems to explain why people use the “Work-Life Balance” reference as a reason for why things are unsatisfactory. There is a problem, the problem is hard to solve, so this is the problem I get to live with.

Why, then, would the pace of articles on “Work-Life Balance” have slackened recently in *Fast Company*? My thought is that this very in-tune publication has caught on to the smell of a rat! Yes, this ‘conundrum’ is a conundrum...but most likely a conundrum of another color. I believe there is a definition that serves us better:

Conundrum: *noun*, (Entry 3a) a question or problem to which only a conjectural answer can be made.

My theory is that “Work-Life Balance” is not a problem without solution. In fact, it is not a problem at all. Rather, it is a matter of misperception.

What I see is that we have one life, not a separate work and life. And I believe that what many view as “having balance” is really about making choices about how we spend our time. This perspective reframes the issue as a matter of clarifying and being responsible for our priorities. I believe many of us are not clear, and perhaps many more are not responsible.

When a working woman with children decides to leave her job and stay home, she does not have a problem with balance. That woman got clear on her priorities and made a choice to honor them. When a father chooses to attend his daughter’s swim meet on a Thursday night rather than stay late in the office, even though others may be there, he is acting on his clear priorities.

Cracking the Conundrum

If we are going to free ourselves of the “Work-Life Balance” conundrum, we—as managers, employees and employers—need to see it for what it is and act accordingly.

As **employees**, we need to be clear what place our work has in our lives:

- What is work for us?
 - Is it something we do out of necessity?



- Is it the price we pay for being adults?
- Is it something we are sentenced to like a punishment for a crime?
- Is it a primary source of self-expression?
- What are we working for?
 - Is working simply a means to satisfy our basic financial needs?
 - Is working a primary source of self-expression as well as satisfying our financial needs; sort of the “two birds with one stone” approach?
- What other priorities do we have in our lives and are they immediate or longer range? Can they be met now or later?
- Do we communicate our priorities to our managers so they can set their expectations along with us?

As **managers**, hopefully by now we are clear what place work has in our lives:

- Why are we holding onto things that could be successfully delegated to someone who reports to us?
 - Are we concerned that no one can do it as well as us?
 - Are we afraid that if we give too much away there will be questions of our value?
 - Are we concerned that long hours and weekends are signs of dedication and we wouldn't want to appear less than dedicated?
- How do we evaluate those who report to us—by the hours they put in or the value they create? Our reports do know and they will act accordingly!

As **employers**, do we simply expect our managers and other employees to make their employment their first priority without any need for discussion?

- Are our employees an expense to be minimized, a resource to be used? Or are they assets to be treasured?
- Do we regularly check with our managers to see that everyone reporting to them understands that they are expected to honor all their priorities in life and not make either their manager or employer the “bad guy?”



There are of course many more questions we could ask, but they all lead back to the same conclusion. We all need to be responsible for our personal priorities. “Personal” does not mean “outside of work” priorities. Personal priorities mean life priorities—no matter what view of life you are currently thinking about. Being crystal-clear about your priorities, sharing them with others, making requests in honor of them, building life to support them takes effort...a lot of it. I promise you this effort will reward you in spades.

Putting effort toward “Work-Life Balance?” It’s a loaded term that people use to explain a problem. You don’t have a problem. You have an opportunity to re-engage with your priorities.

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