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VIEWS FROM THE TOP

Wholesome advice

Integrate work and personal time to achieve some peace of mind

Although business success can be satisfying for leaders, it's important to experience success and fulfillment outside of your professional life. Many find themselves overcommitted to their jobs at the expense of other parts of life, including personal needs, family, friends and community.

In many cases, leaders don't realize the situation until a significant emotional event occurs. This includes losing or leaving their position, the closing or selling of the business, a death in the family, divorce, retirement, children moving away or a spouse finding a new passion.

To minimize the impact, one needs to keep learning and adjusting. The perspective I recommend to clients is to consider ways to integrate work with different aspects of personal life. With technology and the pace of change in business, leaders are now forced, but also more able, to integrate work with life as opposed to past models that tended to be a more rigid separation of professional and personal time.

Measuring integration

Historically, when trying to balance work and life, there has been an inference that work is bad and life is good. But most leaders derive deep satisfaction from their work. Instead of looking at what's good or bad, ask yourself (and those you care about) questions to determine how much adjustment is needed:

- How much of your identity is based on work vs. other life components: significant other, family, health, hobbies, friends and giving back/helping others?
- Do you receive too much satisfaction from one source?

- How vulnerable are you if that source goes away?
- Do you want your children to work as much as you do? Almost every leader I have worked with says 'no' to this question, yet many struggle to give themselves permission to set an example.
- Do you find it difficult to stop thinking about work during non-work activities and relationships?

If your answers indicate your work identity plays too big of a role, it's important to take care of yourself first before taking care of others. A metaphor I often suggest to leaders for this concept is to remember that airline flight attendants always tell passengers to put on their own oxygen mask first before helping others.

In the same manner, if you don't give yourself 'psychological air' first, you can't focus properly on others. Think before you cancel time for yourself. Otherwise, resentment can build, and you won't be as patient with others since your subconscious, at least, realizes you have cheated yourself.

As a portion of allocating time for yourself, take strategic pauses on a scheduled basis to define goals and measure your progress. Work your way through exercises such as these:

- Identify key relationships and determine the amount of time and frequency to spend with each person.
- Set priorities and measure your progress.
- Assess your habits to see which ones help and which ones hinder.
- Consider new habits that can help you achieve improvements.

Share your plan with a coach, peer group, or other confidant who can help you hold yourself accountable and celebrate with you when you succeed in reaching a new level of fulfillment.

Employees follow the leader

Leaders should also realize their approach to work-life integration sets the tone for employees. If leaders don't practice integration, employees will follow suit regardless of stated policies. For example, if the leader is the first to arrive and the last to leave, employees will feel compelled to do the same.

To encourage employees to maintain a healthy work/life integration, it helps to focus on results vs. the amount of time spent on the job. Many companies have adopted creative policies such as these:

- Flexible hours: arrive early or leave late as long as tasks are completed.
- Different work week models: such as closing on Mondays, four 10-hour days or the option to take Wednesdays off instead of Saturday.
- Allowing employees to work from home part time or even full time.
- Time-off to care for family members.
- Sabbaticals: such as a full month off every five years after 10 years of service.

The integration approach is key because trying to isolate work from life usually fails and creates frustration as you can seldom shut either one completely off. Instead, integrate life with work without allowing one to overwhelm the other. Also look for opportunities where both areas can enhance each other, such as bringing a family member on a business trip or going out to dinner with a client and bringing your significant other.

Start with yourself. It's OK to be appropriately selfish in order to maximize happiness and minimize regrets. If you don't set your priorities, someone else will.

I find that the leaders who keep learning and adjusting are the most admired, successful and most importantly, the happiest.

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