

The Elusive Quest for Work/Life Balance

by Rachel Colla



“ *There is never going to be enough time in the day to do everything BUT there is enough time to do the things that are most important to us.* ”

I have recently been reflecting on this crazy quest for ‘work/life balance’ (prompted by a New Year’s party where everyone shared some of their resolutions for 2012, with this being highest on the list!). However this will not be news to you, I’m sure. In fact, every time I read an assessment in our Diploma of Management unit on Managing Workplace and Personal Priorities, I am reminded that this is an ongoing struggle for most leaders. And so it begs the question - Do you think it is time that we just gave up the quest and gave in to the fact that we are never going to attain it? Or is it time to really examine what this means to us?

By its very definition the whole concept of ‘work/life balance’ is a quest that is near impossible to achieve. After all, we only have 24 hours in a day and most of us are required to work to fund an ever-increasing cost of living. Balance, by its very definition, indicates that everything should be in equal proportions. You know the old adage of 8 hours for work, 8 hours for play and 8 hours for sleep – well I don’t think that works anymore (certainly not in my life... last time I had 8 hours straight sleep, hmmmm?!). Not only is it probably not economically viable for most, but the competing demands that we face in our lives makes this balancing act a ridiculous challenge.

However, my proposal is not that we give up on creating the space to enjoy life as well as work, but simply that we take some time to examine what this really means for us; and more importantly the impact our attitudes and beliefs have on our ability to achieve this elusive quest.

In fact, as leaders, achieving a sense of ‘balance’ is critical, not only to our mental health, but, just as importantly, to the health of our business or department. Think about it from a succession plan perspective; how many of us have had emerging leaders that have looked at the model we set for work/life balance and said ‘wow if that’s what comes with leadership then it sure isn’t for me’... and we wonder why it is difficult to get our team to ‘step up’?! We need to really examine

the model of leadership that we are setting for our teams, and the impact this has on our success.

So if we are to get serious about leading in a manner that inspires others to follow, then my challenge to each of us is to debunk some of the common myths that surround work/life balance and find a way to finally achieve what it is we are seeking in 2012!

Myth 1

You Can’t Have It All!

What a load of nonsense! People only say this to give themselves (and others) an out from achieving. I recently read a great article from Dr Tom Barrett who said that when people say ‘they don’t have time’, they are not stating a fact but rather making a statement of priority. We all have exactly the same amount of time available in the day, so why is it that some people seem to be able to achieve so much more? The secret is not rocket science - they simply have different attitudes and beliefs about what is important to them, which directs their decision-making.

There is never going to be enough time in the day to do everything BUT there is enough time to do the things that are most important to us - IF we make the tough decision to say no to the things that are not that important to us. The challenge is do we have the courage, or the clarity, to make these difficult decisions. Put it to the test with this one - Tough Decision #1: vege out watching tv vs having a real conversation with my partner. There are no right or wrong answers to this, it is simply a matter of being clear on what is most important to us, and then using this to guide our decisions.

I have a great mentor when it comes to ‘having it all’ – he is a significant leader in the financial services industry. He runs a very successful company that leads the way in this industry, but it doesn’t come at the exclusion of the rest of his life. Together with his wife, they have 7 children, and have an incredible family life. Not only that, but they are passionately committed to giving

back to the community, and dedicate a significant amount of their time to this. Whenever I ask them how they achieve all this (and still stay sane!), the answer is beautifully simple – they have absolute clarity about what is most important to them and everything else is measured up against this in their decision-making.

The key to ‘having it all’ though, is to start by knowing what ‘it all’ is to you and not living by everyone else’s standards. Do you know what this looks like for you? If not, how do we even begin to work towards a balance that is right for us? Remember ‘one size does not fit all’ when it comes to work/life balance, and as leaders we need to have the courage to live our ‘ideal life’, not be tethered to everyone else’s expectations.

Myth 2

More Gives You More

How many times do we hear people (ourselves?!) say ‘if only I had more... time, money, resources etc... I would be able to achieve X’. Our LEO Des Penny often asks a great question when faced with this statement – ‘so if you had more time (staff, resources etc) what would you do differently that would create better results?’ It really prompts us to examine whether we can actually be more effective by having/doing less. I recently challenged myself to write a list of all the activities in my day that I could strategically quit. Then I added up how much time this would free me up to do other things and I was amazed by how much time I could re-claim!

The same is true in our life outside of work. Sometimes having more just creates more work rather than freeing us up. That’s why de-cluttering has such a powerful impact. Think about it, if you simply de-cluttered the number of email lists you were on (unsubscribe is a very powerful word!) how much more time would you save that would allow you to... read a book, go for a walk, truly listen to someone else’s day?

Richard Koch, in his book ‘Living the 80/20 Way’ demonstrates the flawed thinking that you need more to achieve



Myth 4

Work and Life are in Competition

Finally, I would like to debunk the greatest myth of all when it comes to work/life balance and that is the inference that the two are in competition with each other! The longer we hold on to this belief, the more difficult we will find our quest to achieve balance. We all know that great leaders have a burning sense of purpose that becomes their life's work, so why on earth would we think that life and work are in competition with each other.

Now before you write me off as an idealistic dreamer, I do live in the real world! I have worked in many jobs that have not been aligned with my sense of purpose – some have sapped the life out of me and others were simply a means to an end – but I have also had the privilege of working in roles that are aligned and these give me life rather than taking away from it. In both circumstances it simply comes down to our beliefs about the purpose work serves and this is what directly impacts on our sense of 'balance'. As long as we hold onto the belief that work takes away from the rest of our life, then we are going to struggle to find a sense of balance in our life – given how much of it we spend there! I guess though, this begs the question of whether we are actually clear about what our purpose in life is?! If not, it is time to get some clarity and find a way to align our work to it (even if it is to fund our ability to pursue that purpose outside of work!).

So fellow crusaders on the quest for work/life balance, are you ready to change things up in 2012? One of my favourite quotes is Einstein's brilliant definition of insanity, 'doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result!' If we don't do anything differently regarding our beliefs and behaviours in 2012, then we are never going to achieve this elusive quest for balance in work and life. But maybe if we make some small but sustainable changes we can truly lead a better way for ourselves, our teams and our families this year!



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more, and instead challenges us to find ways to work/play smarter not harder. This principle means that even if we could only spend 20% of our week at home with the people that we love the most, then we should be able to achieve 80% of our happiness from this. However, to achieve this we need to spend that smaller amount of time on high impact activities. Our problem is that we let feelings dictate what we do rather than beliefs ('I don't feel like going to the gym' rather than using the belief that this is important and valuable to motivate us to action). Think about how powerful it would be if you wrote a list of all the activities that you could strategically quit (or put lower down the priority list – yes I know that there are not magic fairies that do the gardening for you – or are there... Jim's Mowing?!) and what that would free you up to do instead?

Myth 3

Multi-Tasking Makes You More Effective!

I know that we women have used this skill to demonstrate evidence of our higher intelligence (haha), however, sadly at our recent Leaders With A Life conference, we had this myth debunked! Evidence shows that if you are multi-tasking on anything other than unconscious tasks, you are actually less productive and less effective. In fact, compartmentalising our time and focus can actually be a far greater skill to cultivate. Now don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean that

we draw lines around our lives and only think about work when we are at work and only think about home when we are at home – this is actually not practical or possible – we are simply not built that way! In fact, the more that we try and do this, the less likely we are to feel 'balanced'.

Instead, we are talking about cultivating the art of being 'present' – truly focusing on the task/person at hand. This is just as true when we are at home as when we are at work. The ability to do this can be greatly assisted by developing simple strategies or rituals that allow us to get focused and then let go. One of my colleagues taught me the great benefit of writing a to-do list for the following day before I leave work at night. This now forms part of my end of day ritual, that not only allows me to be more focused on what I need to do the next day when it is freshest, but it also allows me to 'leave work at work'. Conversely instead of getting frustrated with commuting, I now use that time to 'leave home at home' by writing lists of what needs to be done when I get back home (ahhh the joys of voice activated smart phones – ok so maybe that is multi-tasking!).

More importantly, it simply comes down to a decision to be present wherever we are choosing to be and this is what gives us the greatest impact (plus has the added bonus of leading to a greater sense of balance).