BALANCE E The Choice is Yours

On a cold and sunny March day, Derek Smith[†], 56 years old and a successful business executive, raced his 17-year-old son down an advanced level ski-slope. It was a special day because Derek was "married to his work" as his wife would say, and did not often spend time away from the office. His soneager to demonstrate his skills-wanted to be the victor, but so did his father. Refusing to let his son win, Derek raced down too quickly, his skis span out of control and he hit a tree. When he regained consciousness he found himself in a hospital, with a broken back. When doctors told him he would never be able to ski again: Derek sank into a deep depression. His son was devastated. He said, "It's all my fault, Dad; I should have let you win. I know you always have to win."

His son's misplaced guilt feelings pulled Derek out of his lethargy. He realised the boy was right. He had indeed spent the last twenty years focusing on being the best; mostly at work but also at home. Sure, his ambition had brought him a great salary and a wonderful title but he had not built emotional bonds with his family. He had not encouraged and enjoyed his children's development into able adolescents. Now Derek realised he faced a choice: Do I want to keep on suffering or do I want to find the joy of life?

Seventy five percent of managers want more time with their families

This true story may seem extreme to you, but Derek Smith is not the only executive who comes to realise he has lost the balance in his life.

Fortunately for most of us, it does not take an accident to become aware of other priorities in life. Research shows that over seventy five percent of managers want more time with their families. Fifty percent say they are too exhausted to be fully engaged in what they do. Thirty percent say that their lives are out of control and twenty percent say they are too stressed to enjoy life at all. This imbalance carries a heavy price in terms of health, quality of life and personal as well as professional relationships. For organisations it represents a significant cost to the bottom line.



The business case for balance

Organisations increasingly realise that there is a strong business case for better work-life balance for their employees. Reductions in employee stress and burn-out do result in reduced sick leave, improved productivity, less employee turnover, more creativity and greater motivation among employees. Many companies have been introducing flex-time, day care facilities for employees' children and other creative options to help their employees juggle a diversity of demands. However, achieving life balance in the end is more about the mindset of the individual than about organisational options.

Does work-life balance exist?

Work-life balance as a static state is a myth. It is more like a pendulum that swings back and forth. Every committed professional experiences peaks of conflicting demands. The important questions are: How do I recharge my energy? How do I truly engage in other parts of life that matter to me; family, friends, hobbies? How do I make sure the pendulum is not stuck at an extreme all the time, but allows for

moments of balance?

All dilemmas offer a choice

Life balance starts by realising and accepting that when you face dilemmas, you have a choice. Many people feel victimised, taken "hostage" by their work, demands at home, or even their own success. Howeverunless held at gunpoint-you do not need to feel like a hostage. We can make choices and we should make them consciously. Next time you face contradicting demands, make a conscious choice: Are you going to please the boss, the kids, family, friends or yourself? What do you want? What is your priority? What is the right thing to do? Every choice will mean paying some kind of price. We may want it all, but can we accept not having it all without regret or guilt?

To make the right choices, you'll have to know what you want. Where do your feelings of achievement, joy and contentment come from? Where will they come from a few years from now? Who would you like to have a valued impact on? Once you are clear on what truly matters in your life, your next challenge is to hold a positive state-of-mind in dialogues and negotiations with your boss, colleagues, spouse, friends and children.

Get into a positive state-ofmind

Our brain is wired to focus on

danger and the negative. This is how humans have survived. But if you feel negative or guilty about the choices you are about to make, you will not be able to openly negotiate and find agreement with others so that everyone can win. Feeling guilty about your choices also spoils the experience no matter what choice you make. It uses up the energy you need to be fully present and engaged in what you are doing. Make choices without remorse or regret. Creating life balance is all about reaching external agreement and internal acceptance.

Questions to ask

For organisational leaders who face ever-

increasing change, demands and uncertainty about the future, creating a positive state-of-mind is a critical competence. Without it you will not be able to maintain high energy, full engagement, and motivation. It will also be impossible to lead and coach others. If you are a busy traveller and a leader, you may want to ask yourself the following questions to establish whether you have found some kind of balance between life at work and life at home:

Am I enjoying life? Am I on the path I want to be both professionally and personally? Do I have enough time for my family, my work and myself? How do I recover my energy? Do I feel in control or do I feel like a hostage?

It is important to keep asking yourself these questions as priorities change in different cycles of life.

Derek Smith's new work-life balance

People often don't realise the consequences for the future of the choices made or not made in the present. When I spoke to Derek Smith several years after his accident, he said in no uncertain terms that he wished he had realised the importance of life balance at the beginning of his career. Doing so would have meant less pain for his children, his spouse, his employees and himself.

When he returned to work, he was a changed man. Derek said: "I lived most of my life as a hostage, now I see and face the choices." Somehow, in his late fifties, Derek managed to rewire his brain, which goes to show that, provided you dare to make choices, it is never too late to find work-life balance.

[†]Derek Smith's real name is disguised for privacy reasons.

George Kohlrieser is an organizational and clinical psychologist. He is professor of leadership and organiszational behavior at IMD and consultant to global organiszations around the world. He specialiszes in high performance leadership, high performance teamwork, conflict management, change management, stress management, and personal and professional development. He is also a police psychologist focusing on aggression management and hostage negotiations.

IMD (International Institute for Management Development) based in Lausanne, Switzerland is a world leader in executive education. http://www.imd.ch/

EXECUTIVEWORLD