



My Work/Life Balance Lessons

By Mary LeFevre

About 15 years ago, I had a work/life balance epiphany at a Turner recognition event. While being honored for his contributions to the company, a veteran employee paused to thank his wife for raising their children. I knew he meant it as a loving tribute, but I decided right then and there: “Not me.” I wasn’t going to miss watching my children grow up. I made a promise to myself on the spot not to sacrifice my family for my career or my career for my family.

I have since married and had two daughters who are now six and eight. My husband and I have always agreed that if our children were negatively affected because we both worked, we would make changes to fix that. But we support each other in ways that help us both do our jobs well while raising children who are happy, social, and good students. In fact, I think I’m a better mom because I’m employed and a better employee because I’m a parent.

A lot of what I’ve discovered about making all of this work involves applying what I know about construction to my family life. Here’s what I’ve learned:

The key to success is pre-planning. We take life week-by-week, just like a construction project. We even use this approach with meals – I pre-plan and pre-cook on the weekend, making double and triple batches and freezing entrees so all we have to do is reheat at supper time. Cooking with the crockpot in the winter and grilling in the summer help ensure healthy meals.

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Self-Imposed Work-Life Imbalance

Most work-life imbalance is self-imposed. We do it to ourselves. It’s not our boss, our parents, our spouse or our kids. It’s not the volume of work. It’s not the complicated nature of our lives. They can be contributors. But we are the instigators and we are the deciders. And we can change. (Reading time 180 seconds)

We are all free to choose to say yes or no to the extra hours or the family obligation. Yes, they could fire you or disown you. But they are more likely to dump you because you are an out of balance, tense, stressed person who is difficult to be with, than because you say no once in awhile.

Creating a better work-life balance requires YOU to do it. If you want a different and better work-life balance than you have today, then you need a different mindset and skill set than you have today. You need to stop doing the same things, the same way, every day.

For example you might stop feeling compelled to do those extra five things at the end of the day, or responding to business emails on weekends, or staying late at work when you really don’t have to (See *The River Never Stops Flowing*). Why not refuse to answer the home phone during dinner? What about not taking your cell phone or pda when you go out for dinner? An uninterrupted hour or so to focus on only what you are doing and who you are with at that moment. What a concept.

In addition to “not doing” certain things the same way, you should consider doing some additional things that will add more positive value and balance in your life. Among your most priceless possessions are the minutes and hours that make up your life. Recognize that your time and your life are too valuable not to do certain things.

For example, I’ve recognized that my time and life are too valuable not to go fishing. The closing four months of last year was a business whirlwind for me. It was loaded with wonderful opportunities for our firm and for me professionally. Client commitments made my travel schedule particularly intense, making my limited office time even more demanding. On a late October afternoon I was working in my office, feeling a little weary. I thought, “There’s still an hour left before dark. I’m going fishing.”

I live near an ocean “flat”, which is an area where the water is very shallow, clear and usually has no waves. Although it was a cloudy, drizzly day, when I stood up on my little portable craft I could see everything that was moving in the water within 40 feet in all directions. The flats were particularly alive as often is the case at dusk. I saw lots of small sharks, stingrays, a spotted leopard ray, a school of 40 plus baby tarpon. After 45 minutes or so, I hadn’t caught a fish, but my mind and body were so calm and content in being with those marvelous creatures.

Then right at dark, as I was going to pole the last 15 feet to land, I saw my intended target. Two bonefish were cruising within 12 inches off shore. I cast my live shrimp in front of these two siren specimens of sport fishing. They looked at my bait, turned away, and headed out into the darkened water. It was too dark now to see where they went, but I took a guess and cast again. BAM! One of them picked up my bait and the line began to streak off my reel. The fight that followed was awesome, as it always is with these legendary fish. It was after dark by the time I landed, revived and released

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Go with the flow. Flexibility is essential. It's my responsibility to drive the girls to school but if I have to attend an early morning meeting, my husband does this for me and I pick them up, instead.

Make time for what's important. I want my girls to learn that it's important to give back, so I choose community service roles that let us volunteer together. I also make time to exercise, getting up early to run, when everyone else is sleeping.

Look for support. I'm lucky to be part of a group of professional women in this industry who meet one night a month to socialize and share information and advice, whether it's about jobs or the best summer day camps for kids. They give me emotional support as well as useful information.

Mary LeFevre is manager of business development for the Michigan Business Unit.

Quotes

Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product.

In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.

Friendship with oneself is all important because without it one cannot be friends with anybody else in the world.

Eleanor Roosevelt 1884-1962 United Nations Diplomat, humanitarian and wife of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

this 6 to 7 pound beauty of nature.

As I stood there looking at the last bit of pink in the sky and the moon coming up I thought how pleased I was with the decision to leave my desk that day. I realized,

“My time is too valuable not to go fishing.”

No amount of pay for that hour and future hours like it would be worth giving it up as part of my life. No one could write a paycheck big enough for me to say I'll never fish again. That time is too valuable to me.

Now this fishing turn on may make no sense to you. You might pay to not have to go fishing. But there is a turn on for you that does make sense. It means a lot to you. What is it?

What in your life is too valuable not to do? What is or was or could be your turn on that makes your heart beat or calms your soul? When is the last time you did it? When will you do it next?

And even if you enjoy your work immensely, as I do, don't make that your only answer. If work is the only answer to what motivates and drives you, over time it will lose it's luster. Balancing it with other life motivators makes you better and more intense in your work.

For me, fishing actually makes my paycheck go up. Even though I did not get back on the water for quite some time after that evening, that hour had imbued me with an extra shot of joy and purpose that made my life better for months. As a result I was more mentally prepared and motivated to contribute to my clients success and enjoy doing so. Creating balance in my life better prepared me to increase my income.

The same is true for all of us. Whether it's that uninterrupted time with family, or friends or your special personal pursuit – lock in a mindset to make it happen.

Improve your work and improve your life. Avoid self-imposed work-life imbalance. Discover what your time is too valuable not to do...and then do it.

E-Tip - Stress Control Techniques

Physical Exposure to Turn On Stress Control Genes:

- Sleep Well
 - No caffeine after 2 p.m.
 - Think relaxing thoughts right before going to sleep
- Eat Right
 - Avoid heavy meals after 7 p.m.
 - Moderation: Alcohol - Fats - Sugars
- Exercise
 - Combine cardiovascular and muscle
 - Try to do at least 10 minutes of exercise everyday. More extensive 2 to 4 times per week when possible

Mental Exposure to Turn On Stress Control Genes:

Train your brain to:

- Focus on what can go right, not what can go wrong.
- Anticipate problems and learn from negatives but do not dwell on them.
- Dwell on the positive, pleasant things that occur during your day.
- Mentally celebrate your small successes during the day.