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My Work/Life Balance Lessons

By Kurt Gavalier

My work-life balance situation changed dramatically a little over a year ago when I was promoted to my current position as general superintendent – and my wife gave birth to our first child a week later. It's been a big adjustment for me as I've taken on more responsibilities on both the professional and personal fronts, but like so many other situations that challenge us, it's been an exciting growth experience for me.

I'm fortunate to work with many people who are at a similar stage in life with young families, and with others who understand the demands of a young family in a two-income household. The support that comes with that understanding makes a big difference for me. There are a lot of good work-life balance role models here, too. Here's what I've learned from them and through my own experiences to make sure I stay on track both at work and at home:

Communicate. Open communication is essential at work and at home. If you're stressed about something on the job, talk to your supervisor about it so you can find a solution together. Similarly, if something's not getting done at home, talk about it. People won't know what's going on if you don't tell them.

Share the load. My wife works outside the home, too, so it's extra important for us to share the household workload as equally as possible. Sometimes we divide chores according to who does it best, but many times, we just "do it" without worrying about whose job it is or should be. It all evens out in the end.

Use lists. We all like to think that we can remember everything we need to do, but the reality is that we can't, so we need to-do lists.

Everyone's A Customer

Relationships, both business and personal, are an exchange. Value given for value received. What value you offer up will determine in large part how positive your payback from that relationship will be. As a result, developing a mindset that everyone in your life is a customer can dramatically improve the joy and benefits from both your professional and personal life. (Reading time 180 seconds)

Today's economic customers are much more selective about how they will spend their money and who they will exchange it with. At work that is true of your internal customers, those co-workers who directly or indirectly evaluate you and determine your paycheck. It is also very true with your organization's external customers, who are the source of everyone's paychecks.

Off the job you are also exchanging value for value every day in your personal relationships. Because of that you should recognize and treat your family members, your friends, your significant other and even strangers as customers. Doing so develops an important positive habit that makes your life better and pays you back automatically in all your important relationships.

Because you want a customer to pay you, typically you focus more on treating them in very positive ways. The better you develop your skills to serve your customers, the more they are willing to compensate you. Here are a few key points that produce immediate and sustainable payback...both on and off the job.

1. Realize that your customers don't care how much you know...until they know how much you care. When you are proficient in your job or specific skills often the tendency is to try and solve all problems with your expertise. Sometimes in the process you can even be condescending with your customers. The result can be that your customer loses confidence in your "know how" skills, because you've done little to demonstrate you care about them and their needs.

Several years ago our firm was remodeling a space to open a training center. It was scheduled for a grand opening on Monday. The Friday before the toilets were not working... and we had a hundreds of people coming in for training in less than 72 hours. I saw the plumber on the job getting ready to leave, stopped him and asked, "When will the bathrooms be working?"

His somewhat irritated response was, "I don't know. We need some parts, and I've got an emergency job and have to leave now." I tried to calmly say, "I just need to know whether you'll be finished. We're opening Monday. If for some reason you can't get it done, we'll try and find someone else."

Before I could finish he cut me off and said, in a loud, rude voice, "I told you we're doing the best we can and I've got to go." With that he got in his truck and left. To say the least, I was a little stressed, even more so as the day wore on and no different feedback was forthcoming.

As it turned out the plumbing crew worked all weekend and all the bathrooms functioned fine on Monday. They executed on their technical know how in time. But do you think I every used that plumbing company again? No...and I made sure anyone I knew considering a commercial plumber avoided them as well.

This individual, and most of his company had apparently never learned that there is more to doing your job (and to living your life) than just applying your technical skills or practical solutions. Your customer needs to know you care about them as well. How do you show that?

2. Recognize that your words, observations and attitude are as much a part of taking care of your customer as your know how or expertise. Choose positive words when you communicate. Reflect an interested tone or relevant questions. Be attentive to other's interests, opportunities or challenges.



We've tried Excel spreadsheets and other approaches on the job but have recently reverted back to the low-tech notebook and pencil. All it takes is a line item with a checkbox next to it.

Integrate your professional and personal calendars. I add my family commitments to my professional calendar so that I don't have conflicts. For example, if my wife is going to be out of town and I need to take the baby to daycare in the morning, I need to have that information in my schedule.

Make sure you have support. I am surrounded at work by people I can trust to do their jobs well so I can leave at the end of the day without worrying about their performance. I also have an excellent support network in our longtime friends, most of whom also have young families. We help and learn from each other in many ways.

Kurt Gavalier is a general superintendent in the Washington, D.C., business unit.

Quotes

By Maya Angelou

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

"Love life, engage in it, give it all you've got. love it with a passion, because life truly does give back, many times over, what you put into it."

Maya Angelou (born April 4, 1928) is an American author, poet, and playwright.

3. Actively listen!

There is a direct relationship between communications and customer satisfaction. Active listening is the most important part of communication. It shows you are sincerely interested and care. This is true whether you are talking with your boss, customer, best friend, child or your significant other. Here are the steps to actively listen:

- **Really focus on listening. No multi-tasking!** No glancing down at your phone, typing on your computer, reading the paper or watching TV while someone is trying to talk to you. Do not be focused on what you want to say as soon as they shut up. Your one activity is to LISTEN and really hear, as best you can, what your customer in life is trying to tell you.
- **Ask clarifying questions.** If you've listened well there will probably be one or two things you need to clarify. Ask about them until you think you understand.
- **Then say, "I understand" or "I see" and repeat the key points you have heard clearly, concisely and positively.**

"I understand you would like the finished proposal by Thursday morning and you want two price alternatives included."

"I see you want to do something different for vacation this year and you'd like to start planning it out soon so we don't run out of time."

At this point they will often add something they left out or that was misunderstood.

4. Don't let commitments fall through the cracks. All talk and no action will undermine any relationship. Even if you intended to follow through, but forgot, the message you send is you don't care that much. Instead immediately commit to a time in your calendar to address any "customer" action needed. Take out your PDA or planner and say, "Okay. I'm going to put down on Wednesday morning to finish your proposal" or, "Let's put down on our calendars for Saturday at breakfast to start our new vacation planning."

Treating everyone as a customer increases the positive perception, trust and confidence others have in you. The result is more value, balance, achievement and enjoyment in your life. Just remember:

- They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.
- Show how much you care through your words, observations and attitude.
- Actively listen.
- Don't let your credibility fall through the cracks. Get it in your calendar.

It's not a hard habit to get into and you will find that your life is so much better when all your customers are happier. Why not start now by treating the next person you talk to as your best customer.

Smiles,

Jim Bird

E-tip

Start Your Conversations With the Good Things

We all value having friends and family we can be ourselves with. But that shouldn't mean dumping all the bad things that happen to us on them as soon as we see them. Make it a point to talk about the good things that are happening for you and for them. Remember, relationships are an exchange, and you will generally get back what you put in.