

Successful Supervisor Part 46

Mastering Work-Life Balance

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of the most vexing problems faced by supervisors is the issue of work-life balance. Dedication to job and career is a critical element for any supervisor, and since the number of issues that need attention is seemingly infinite, there is a tendency to work too hard and too many hours. This article will share some ideas that may be helpful at creating a better balance.

Keep Things in Perspective

It is easy to lose perspective and let work issues become an overwhelming commitment of your time. Actually, I believe it is a form of addiction that sneaks up on you when you aren't looking. It is all very well intended at first, but if left unchecked, it can take you down a dangerous road that can rob you of a vital part of your life. Here are some tips that may be helpful to remember.

1. Pay attention to what is going on

We can get sucked into a life of continuous overwork without even realizing it. Recently I found myself way overloaded and quit a job when my employer proposed to double my already oppressive workload without any additional form of compensation. The shock of it made me realize that I had long ago crossed the line of the work I am prepared to do for the benefits received. If I had not been shocked into that realization, I might still be working there.

The lesson is simple, but difficult to do. Take stock every year of the amount of time you are devoting to work and ask if it is reasonable. If not, take steps to correct the problem.

2. Don't let them nibble you to death

If you are working 55 hours a week, it is easy to get you to extend to 57 hours. If you are working 80 hours a week, then 82 hours seems not so much of an added burden. The way to prevent this kind of "scope creep" is to put a Stop Loss on your situation.

A Stop Loss is a term used in the stock market where you put in an automatic sell order in if the stock reaches a specific level. This rule helps you avoid a catastrophic loss

when your attention may be diverted. The equivalent of a Stop Loss with time spent at work might sound like this, “I realize there will be peak times at work where I need to put in more time in a particular week, but if it ever reaches XX hours a week, I am going to refuse the work.”

3. Go offline

Easy access to the internet has made it difficult to get away from work. Set some boundaries for when you are not accessible (even by phone) and stick to them. If you consciously manage time for your personal life, then you will find it much easier to have one. If you ignore the issue, then you will likely slip toward overload a little bit each year until work squeezes out the vitality of life.

It is not uncommon these days to see a family huddled around the dinner table where everyone is looking down at their PDAs. It is equally common to have some members of the family texting each other rather than speaking out loud. Try to avoid using devices during family time and actually speak to each other verbally. Kids may have a hard time with this one, but you may be able to hold a rule.

4. Don't work when you are resting

We all need good interrupted sleep each day to be able to perform at our best. Shut off your phone ringer when you are sleeping and just let it go. Supervisors do understand the need to rest, but sometimes they feel the world will quit turning if they are not personally involved in every action. If you allow abuse of your rest time then people will have no compunction about calling you at all hours.

The other half of this equation is that you need to delegate and have faith in others in your group to carry on without you when you are unavailable. If you insist on being involved in every decision, not only are you failing to develop and trust your people, but you are losing a lot of sleep.

Make Sure You have a Variety of Interests

It is easy to become so fixated on work that other parts of our life are squeezed out. The antidote to this problem is to maintain a variety of interests and intentionally carve out time to feed each of them. Sometimes it feels like if you could just focus exclusively on work, then you could get it all done. Unfortunately, this is a trap. The work is infinite, if you let it be. Here are some tips to keep you well rounded.

1. Give family issues a high priority

At the end of your life, you will not be counting the number of 90 hour work weeks you put in, or even what you accomplished with all your dedication. You will be thinking about the times you spent with family and friends, because those are the real meaning in our lives. Make sure you have at least one trip a year away from the hubbub of

everyday life at work. Make sure you participate in the activities of your kids and spouse. Sometimes you need to manage the time carefully, but it is important to participate.

2. Find ways to give back to your community

There are an infinite number of opportunities for you to help out other people. Find the equation that suits you and that you feel good about. I call this element your “give back ratio.” You need to calculate how much time you are putting in exchanging your talent for money and how much time you are giving back to others. There is no right or wrong answer to the calculation, but you have to ask yourself seriously if you are satisfied with your personal numbers. If the give back ratio is way too low, then you need to find ways to change it.

The same concept holds regarding money. You need to figure out whether you are giving back enough. It is a personal calculation that you don’t need to share with anyone else, but make sure you are in full agreement with your conscience.

3. Have a hobby that you really love

To fully get away from work, it is not enough to just turn off the phone. You need to find an activity that you enjoy so much that you become refreshed when you do it. For me, mowing my lawn was always a great escape. (That may sound odd to some, but it is true.) Yard work for me has always been a way to get exercise while doing something that has an immediate payback.

It does not even need to be a physical release for you to benefit. Some people like to paint, or write, or sing. The idea is to have a few personal passions that you can indulge in to provide a balance from the constant grind of the job.

4. Make work into play

The old adage says, “If you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life.” I can mostly subscribe to that logic, although even if you love your work it can become a bit too much at times. The basic idea is to find work that is intrinsically fun for you as well as challenging. I know a CEO who calls this aspect her, “pants on fire - can’t wait to get to work” attitude. She works very long hours but has a ball doing it on most days. In fact, she has made “fun” one of the core values of her company. There is nothing wrong with that, because her company is incredibly successful.

Remember to Keep Yourself in Control

The bottom line of this article is that you need to be responsible for the balance in your own life. Don’t complain and grumble about the constant pressures of work crowding out the value from your life. Do something about it! The world (and your boss) will gladly

accept all of the “nose to the grindstone” work you are willing to put in. Just make sure you don’t grind your nose totally off! Use the tips above to balance your life, and you will have many more fond memories when you are older. As a side benefit, you will likely live longer.

Recognize also that there are phases in life, and seek to manage your life for a good balance in each phase. You will likely ratchet up the percentage of time volunteering after you retire, for example, and that may present another challenge to get the right balance for your life. In each phase of your life you need to test frequently if your various activities are in a healthy equilibrium.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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