



# the Leadership LENS

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a monthly resource providing insight, opinion & practical information on life balance, creativity & perspective

## A Better Work Life Balance for Executives - part 3

### Emotionally Vacate

Another benefit from an extended vacation or sabbatical is that it helps executives emotionally vacate their positions. If you check in with the office, it's as if you never really left. In a new study of knowledge workers, Lexmark International found that 92% of respondents make or take work-related communications outside of work, including on vacations. Nearly 75% stay switched on during the weekends and a fifth of them have been interrupted during a date for work purposes. This 'constantly on' approach only leads to burnout and away from true sense of self. During an expedition to the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, I met the CEO of a publicly traded company who was traveling for over three weeks without being in touch via voice mail, e-mail or via any other means. He purposely traveled to distant lands where he would not be tempted to check in with the office nor could anyone get in touch with him either. And since he delegated effectively like Sally Jewell at REI, the organization got along fine without him. This is in sharp contrast to what Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia told employees recently. As crazy as it sounds, the company said employees should flat out leave the company if they were not prepared to work weekends and long evenings over the coming months for no extra reward.

In a 2005 survey of 55,000 workers, Alcan, based in Montreal, revealed deep dissatisfaction with heavy workloads and long hours, says Steven Price, Alcan's human resource director. In a series of self-correcting steps, a half-dozen top executives got coaching on



A cairn of rocks is visible as hikers pass near the Tibetan border in northern Bhutan, (c) Mark Sincevich

how to be better role models, partly by speaking up about their own challenges managing workloads. Executives began encouraging managers and employees to 'push back and say I'm not working on weekends and such.' Even IBM has over 50 different programs promoting work life balance and 40% of its employees today work off of the company premises. I noticed the lack of traffic at IBM's main offices in Gaithersburg, Maryland recently when I trained key executives. I worked with some of their executives on developing simple, yet powerful messages, weaving these messages throughout their presentation, and then properly rehearsing the delivery of their presentation for more power and action.

Other organizations offer similar incentives to foster work life balance in small steps so that when executives want to take longer vacations or extended time away from the office, the action of emotionally vacating becomes much easier. American Century, #2 on FORTUNE's 100 Best Places to work list based on benefits, said, "achieving this national distinction is a direct reflection of the caliber of our people, our values-based culture and our unwavering commitment to our investors." American Century also pays adoption expenses and the cost of home fitness equipment for its employees. Some employees at Dell, Inc. have eliminated set office hours by handing over to employ-

ees how and when they achieve goals. A results oriented work environment (ROWE) was also initiated by Best Buy, Inc. at its corporate offices in Minneapolis in order to allow most of their employees the space they need to get a reasonable amount of work accomplished while at the same time paying attention to family and personal obligations. I was told a similar program for retail stores is under development.

### Own the Moment

One of the best ways to practice an effective work life balance is to keep being reminded of the power of Stephen Covey's Quadrant #2. This is the most important quadrant and those organizations that win the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award spend at least 70% of their time in this 'important, but not urgent' area. A great way to spend more time in this area is to set appointments with yourself to check in with e-mail, voice mail and the office. Stephen Crawley, an HR Executive, decided to take Covey's advice. He eliminated all voice mail, pulled the plug on his e-mail and stopped using his cell phone as the primary way for people to connect with him. This forced people to find him in person only when it was important. He said, "It worked, the more off of the grid I got, the better our sales and margins, while staff domestic morale improved."

Susan Cramm, the founder of Valuedance, an executive coaching firm in San Clemente, CA and the former CFO of Chevy's Mexican Restaurants said, "I fell victim to one of those 'full jobs' and, like many, hired others to do the personal work I no longer had time to do. I found that I used consumption as a pitiful replacement to living a meaningful life." She borrows her definition of a full job from meaning 'half as many peo-

ple, paid twice as well, and producing three times as much' from author Charles Handy's book, *The Age of Paradox*. She feels that an executive's solution to work life balance must come from within. This solution should be one that makes the most sense while being true to your values. She goes on to further state, "We discovered something simple, yet profound –that work-life balance isn't about having more free time; it's about devoting your life, and the hours within it, to be consistent with your values and passions." This is exactly what Best Buy was saying to its managers. It's great that corporate is addressing work life balance and will eventually come up with a solution for its retail stores, but you need to set effective boundaries with yourself first.

How can you learn to set boundaries and to discover your core values? According to the Prana line of clothing, sold at REI stores, a great place to start is with the breath. From Prana's merchandise label is says, "Prana is breath, and breath is the beginning of every decision and action. Something as simple as being aware of our breath can bring us into the present moment – mindful breathing brings us home. It's is Prana's hope that this practice of mindful breathing can find its way into more individuals and one by one these positive 'environmental' impacts could lead to environmental ones." When you get to know yourself better, you can then understand your employees, your organization and your family better too.

### **Practice Mutual Respect**

One of the things I know about myself is that I tend to obsess about the little details before I leave to go out of town for longer than a few days. I do things like turn off all of the lights, take the trash out and set the thermostat higher than normal. Doing this list of little things almost made me miss my flight to Iceland recently. Even though I arrived nearly 90 minutes before the flight was

scheduled to take off, all airlines oversell their seats. Luckily I got the very last seat in the middle of the airplane. Breathing a sigh of relief when I sat down, I noticed a young woman sitting next to the window.

She told me that she was going to Holland as part of a language immersion program for six weeks. She was going to live with a Dutch family and would not speak English the entire time. Beyond her 20 hours of language requirements per week, she was going to have plenty of time to see the countryside and to visit with her family in a nearby town. She bemoaned the fact that she has plenty of time to travel, but has limited funds. I said this was the opposite complaint from many in the working world. Most people have plenty of money, but limited time to travel. A main reason for the limited travel time is the United States is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't have a vacation law on its books. Having a personal benefit of vacation that could translate form one job to the next like health insurance would encourage more executives to travel and would certainly increase their creativity.

In a May 2006 survey by the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC), 85% of recruiters have seen job candidates reject a job offer because it wouldn't include enough work-life balance, and two-thirds of those companies surveyed are developing programs to help top candidates boost their family time without sacrificing their careers. In addition, 24% of those surveyed said they would turn down a promotion that would hurt their work/life balance while 87% said work/life balance is critical in their decisions to join or remain with an employer. It seems more executives are becoming inspired by the likes of the Sally Jewell's, the Rob McLoed's, and the Lee Scott's of this world. The more you practice mutual respect by setting clear boundaries around your work and

life balance, the less pull your organization will have on you in your off hours.

One way to develop mutual respect is to keep coming up with reasons why it is healthy and advisable for your organization to allow you to travel on a regular basis. When my wife was the Director of HR for a financial services firm, she and I wanted to take a two-month sabbatical and travel around the world. At first she didn't know how she was going to convince the rest of the management team to let her take the time off. What she decided to do was to present her company with all of the benefits as to why our trip was a great business decision for her organization. She was going to come back refreshed and recharged, generating new ideas and gaining a fresh perspective. She also developed a coverage plan that started months before our departure. It involved cross training other executives and employees on her roles and responsibilities. I'm happy to report that she didn't even check in with the office once in two months! Furthermore, her actions sparked an entire wave of other executives and employees taking extended periods of leave to teach English in China to going back to school for an executive program. This extra benefit helped to keep top managers and employees and greatly reduced turnover costs. When you set the pace for your organization, become the change you want to see, delegate effectively, emotionally vacate when not working, and own the moment, you will be strengthening your organization and improving the connection you have to yourself.



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