

A Case for Balanced Living

Kaushik Mitra offers a fresh perspective on work-life balance which companies may need to adopt

The word balance means many things to us. For instance, corporations are working to balance short term results with creating longer term sustainable value for their shareholders. Corporate executives are challenged with maintaining a work-life balance. Investors are balancing risk and return. A musician is creating harmony by balancing scales and notes, while the accountant balances his books. In a more literal sense, balance and timing are 'life skills' for a trapeze artist. Couples strive to strike the right balance in their own relationships and parents seek balanced development of their children. Applying a larger canvas, policy makers are keen on balanced economic development, opinion makers push for a more balanced society, and environmental groups for maintaining balance in the eco system.

Balance is clearly, a much sought after 'state' in every sense, but is not spoken of enough, which is a pity! We live in a world of extremes and excesses which is neither sustainable, nor desirable. Balance is indeed the need of the hour! In this article I focus on two specific aspects of balance which are, balance in life and its correlation to happiness, and a fresh approach to managing a work-life balance.

Ensuring sustainable happiness

When talking about maintaining a balance in our individual lives and its importance in ensuring sustainable happiness, the question to ask is what is important to each one of us? The answer I am guessing for most of us will be success and recognition at work and at home with our families. These are the two most common chan-

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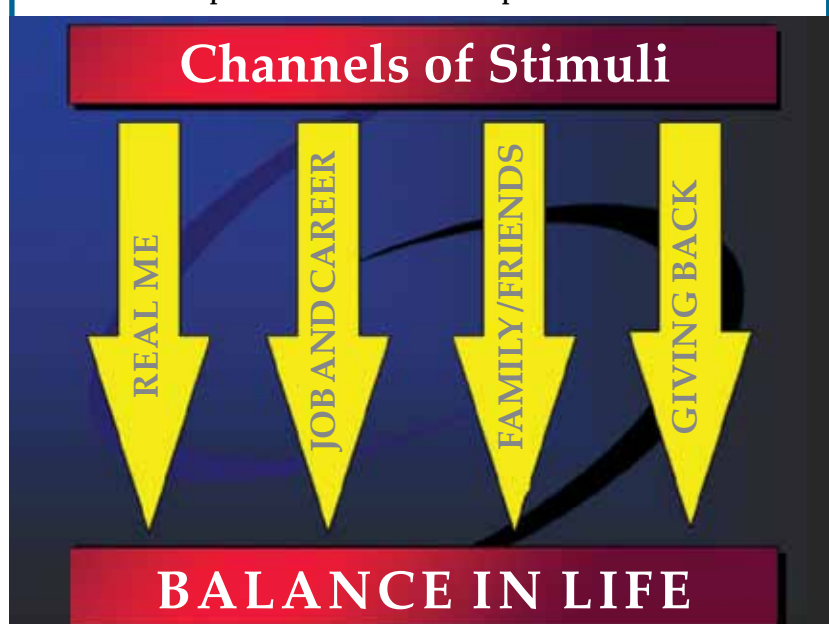
nels of stimuli in our lives every day. The balance in an individual's life is directly proportionate to the multiple channels of stimuli he or she has created (See Chart 1).

Now let us take an example to illus-

trate this point. Ram is an ambitious, smart, and successful executive in a multinational company. However, he is not happy. His ambition and career focus has prevented him from opening up any other channel of stimuli, apart from work. Ram is constantly trading off quality family time to fuel his career growth ambition, as he puts in more and longer hours at work. Every day he seeks positive feedback from the only channel of stimuli he has, which is his work and career. The days when things do not go well for him at work, he is miserable. This drives him to work harder and longer. It is a vicious cycle for him and he has no balance in life. Happiness remains elusive.

Work and family are the most important channels of stimuli. The

Chart 1: Multiple channels of stimuli help maintain balance in life



former determines one's identity in society and financial success, while the latter creates a sense of belonging and fulfils our emotional need to love and be loved. However, not often do we get to pursue a career that we are passionate about. Also, in many instances, relationships do not work out. This is why we feel a strong need to open more channels of stimuli so that we can ensure balance and happiness in our lives.

The 'real you' channels

Finding the 'real you' channel of stimuli is a powerful third force, that provides the much needed buffer against things not working out so well on the work and family fronts. This channel of stimuli is created when you take time out to do what makes you happy. You seek out your true passion and once you have selected it, you invest time and resources in making it a sustainable stimuli channel. So, if

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music is your true love, go buy that expensive electric guitar or keyboard, now that you have the purchasing power. For those of us who have seen the movie 'Rock On', will be able to relate to what I am saying. Similarly, if you have a travel bug, go see the world and do not feel guilty about

taking time out from your work. For me, I have always been passionate about writing but it is only now, after 22 years of balancing work and family, that I have started putting 'pen to my passion'. On weekends I push my teenage son for a cricket session at the nets. By doing this I am taking out time to do what makes a 'happy me'. I wish I had done this earlier! The trick then, is to unlock the 'real you' channel of stimuli early in life.

The channels of stimuli have a direct correlation on our balance and happiness in life. There will be days when things do not go well at work, or at home, but if you have other channels open, you will be able to restore balance by dialling these up. Think of the channels of stimuli as life's great graphic equaliser. Balancing the equalisers helps you maintain harmony within and creates music for those around. Expanding and leveraging multiple channels of stimuli helps you



to get a far more fulfilling and comprehensive experience from life. Looked at another way, multiple channels of stimuli ensure higher ROI from life.

Work-life balance

Now let us turn to a challenge that organisations, particularly MNCs face in the Indian context that is, work-life balance of their employees. The pace of change both within and outside an organisation drives a level of agility that needs employees to stay tuned to their work 24x7. Technology has abetted the 24x7 work connect with on-the-go data and voice connectivity. No matter where you are, the office is not far behind.

For employees this is a serious concern and it shows up in organisation health surveys every year for most results' driven organisations. The HR function has been grappling with a solution for this thorny issue but with moderate success at best. The challenge is while there is genuine management intent to address these issues the ground realities make it difficult to implement the solutions. As a result work-life balance remains 'lip service' in most organisations and not surprisingly, employees frown at most WLB initiatives as they remain superficial.

A fresh perspective

Here is a fresh perspective on how we can help address the WLB challenge in a meaningful way. Typically,

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employees like to treat the work and personal time zones as two separate and distinct compartments with no overlap. The week is the work zone and the weekend, the personal zone. Dissonance and discord creeps in as soon as the work zone encroaches upon the personal zone. Having spent a number of years working in a multicultural environment outside India, I have seen western professionals handle this dilemma in a very effective manner. Instead of thinking about work and life as different zones, it is more appropriate to think about it in terms of moments. There are work moments and there are personal moments (See Chart 2).

There can be work moments out-

side the work zone that is, on week-ends or outside office on workdays. Employees must accept this and be open to this reality. Similarly, there can be personal moments in the work zone. Employees in India are not very comfortable in taking time off during work hours to attend to important personal work. As a result the busy MNC executive seldom makes it to his or her child's parent teacher meeting at school, or music concert, school sports, or cricket game. We are caught between two burdens of guilt that is, either the guilt of being away during work hours to attend a family event, or missing those critical family moments by not attending them. Usually, work takes precedence and family the backseat.

The solution

For employees, the 'unlock' lies in being comfortable with work moments in one's personal zone and being equally guilt free in taking advantage of personal moments in the work zone. For organisations, the solution lies in formalising the 'moments' framework of work-life balance. HR policies should allow for personal time credits to employees for work moments in their personal time. Employees should be allowed to use those credits for personal moments in the work zone.

Conclusion

This way, employees will battle no dissonance when working in their personal time as they know they can redeem this time from their work time, when the need arises, without facing pangs of guilt. Companies have started implementing some versions of this through flexible hours and compensatory time offs. However, as organisations strive for employee productivity along with employee satisfaction, adopting the moments' approach to address the work-life balance issue will provide a win-win solution for both employees and organisations. ■



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Chart 2: A balanced approach

