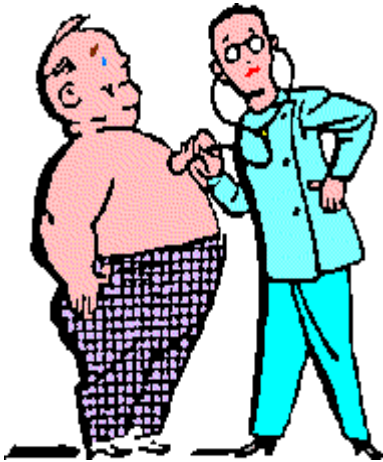


The Imbalance of Life/Work Balance

By Simma Lieberman



I've been writing and speaking about work/life balance for over 18 years. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken workshops on work/life balance and tried to make changes in their lives. Senior leaders have supported wellness programs for their employees and lent words of encouragement at their kick-off. Yet, as much as I love speaking, writing and helping people in organizations with work/life balance, I see imbalance in the work/life balance discussion. And this imbalance stems from focusing only on the individual and not on the role the organization plays in helping its employees achieve true work/life balance. Did you know the following?

* Health Care expenses are almost 50% higher for Workers who report high levels of stress - 1

* People who experience work/life imbalance are three times more likely to suffer from heart problems, infections, injuries, mental health problems and back pain, and five times more likely to suffer from certain cancers - 2

* Workers who have to take time off work because of stress, anxiety or a related disorder will be off the job for about 20 days - 3

As these statistics show, work/life balance is still an important (and costly) issue both for individuals and the organizations they work for. So, in this issue of the Lieberman Learning Letter, I expand the work/life balance discussion and make the case that for true work/life balance to occur, there must be alignment around three different components of work/life balance: organizational programs, a supportive culture, and individual responsibility and accountability.

The Three Pillars of Work/Life Balance in Organizations

To achieve work/life balance in any organization or institution, a work/life balance initiative must be supported at three levels: the programmatic level, the cultural level, and the individual level.

Here's an overview of what a holistic approach to a work/life balance initiative looks like:

1. The Programmatic Level

Organizations that truly support work/life balance have a combination of programs that support the balance they are advocating to their employees. Such programs may include:

- * EAP programs, so employees can get expert help dealing with stress related issues and be more relaxed at work and at home

- * Flex time, in such forms as: longer work days so that employees either work four days a week or have every other Friday off; allowing employees to start work early in the morning so they can leave early or they start later and stay later; or, job sharing and part-time telecommuting.

- * Personal time off (in addition to sick leave and holidays) so employees can take care of family or personal needs

- * Childcare support: on-site, company run but off-site, or contracts for discounts from external providers in locations close to work or employees' homes

- * Onsite fitness programs or discounts at gyms and fitness centers

- * In house stores and on-site concierge services

These kinds of programs work. Others—such as putting a stop to people working overtime in the name of work/life balance—do not. Too often, nothing is done about reducing the workload alongside this new requirement. As a result, employees end up either taking more work home or come in extra early to finish their work. They cover up their overtime because they don't want their managers to think that can't get their work done. Not only is this stressful, but they don't even get paid for their additional time.

2. The Cultural Level

At the same time, organizations need a culture that supports work/life balance for all employees. This means that it is being driven by senior management and is incorporated into the culture at all levels. The CEO and everyone in management sets the example and allows employees to take personal time off, spend time with friends and family and attend workshops.

Work/life balance programs are doomed if management gives lip service, tells employees they should take time for themselves, and not work overtime, and then piles on the work and asks employees to cancel or reschedule vacations and personal time off because there is so much work to do. At the same time, if management is perceived to be working 80 hours a week, always stressed out and not taking care of their health, employees get the same message that they can't take time off or take advantage of programs that could help them.

A good work/life balance initiative starts with an assessment of employees at all levels to determine what is best for the people in your organization and how to set up a culture that supports and enables people to do what is best for them, and therefore best for the organization.

3. Individual Responsibility and Accountability

Finally, it's essential to embed into a work/life balance initiative individual responsibility and accountability. After all, you can create a work/life balance culture, have the best programs and services in place but it is up to you and your employees to use them. You have no control over what people do when they leave work. They can choose to stay home and obsess about work, or take work home every night and weekend, or use their time off to be a couch potato, channel surf and sleep. They can live on fatty foods, smoke and feel bad or they can enjoy their time away from work, engage in hobbies, exercise, eat well, be happy, healthy and come back to work with renewed passion and energy.

When work/life balance initiatives incorporate individual responsibility measures, this increases the chances that whatever new steps individuals take as a result of a workshop or program on work/life balance, they will continue it.

In short, all three components have to be in place to create true work/life balance. Without programs, individuals will be on their own to tackle a systematic challenge. Without a supporting culture, programs you create will not be fully utilized and leveraged. And, without individual responsibility and accountability, there will be a lot of talk about work/life balance, but not a lot of walking that talk.

Senior leaders, managers and employees need to view work/life balance as being in their interest. Organizations and individuals need to be clear about the benefits in terms of performance, productivity and profit and the consequences of doing nothing. And work/life balance initiatives need to be set-up and structured with these three components in mind.

Nine Questions to Ask Yourself about Your Own Work/Life Balance

To start thinking about work/life balance in your organization, ask yourself the following:

- * **What would Work/Life Balance in your organization look like?**
- * **What are the organizational strengths that support Work/Life Balance at every level?**
- * **What are the challenges in creating Work/Life Balance in your organization?**
- * **What needs to be done to overcome the challenges?**
- * **Who else needs to be involved?**
- * **Within your work position what can you do to create Work/Life Balance for yourself and your organization?**
- * **What are you doing to create Work/Life balance for yourself?**
- * **Are there any programs or policies at work that you are not using that could be helpful?**
- * **Are you taking the time to remember to breathe every day?**

About the author:

Simma helps organizations create more profitable cultures and improve individual and organizational performance. She is a consultant, speaker, and trainer. Simma is the co-author of Putting Diversity to Work (Crisp Publications, 2003), a guide for managers on leading a diverse workforce. To learn more about Simma's holistic approach to work/life balance visit her website at www.simmalieberman.com