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Work/Life

Beat the Work/Life Balance Conundrum with a Quality of Life Context

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The Work/Life Balance Conundrum

I don't like using the term "work/life balance" to describe the relationship between my personal and professional worlds. For me, the word "balance" suggests an "either/or" relationship between my personal life and professional work—as if when I'm at work, I'm not in my real life; and when I'm not at work, my job somehow disappears from my consciousness.

Now it is true that work can be tedious, frustrating, unfulfilling, and limiting—and sometimes (maybe even more than any of us care to admit), we'd rather be fishing than at our desks. And it is also true that too much work can detriment the quality of our personal lives—our families suffer on account of it, and in turn, so do we. But the truth is, the boundaries we set for where work and life should begin or stop are variable for each of us—there's no one-size-fits-all formula that will establish a universal standard for saying to a particular person, "This quantity of life and that quantity work is the 'right' mix for your happiness".

If you try to "balance" work and life in such an "either/or" framework, you will ultimately discover the fundamental paradox of work-life balancing strategies: You can't get enough "not work" to make a bad job better. Tolerable for a while, maybe; but not all better. In fact, if you try to compensate for a bad job by doing more personal stuff, the worse off you'll be because you'll hate to get back to work even more!

So this is the first lesson we teach at the Center for Quality of Life: the more you separate life and work, the more effort, struggle, dissatisfaction, and pain you will create for yourself, which in turn creates stress, and ultimately, burn-out or melt-down.

Consider a Quality of Life Context

At the Center for Quality of Life, we have another way of looking at the relationship between life and work. Rather than discrete and independent paths, we consider work and life to be interwoven threads—part of the same fabric of who you are, what you do, how you feel about yourself, and how you relate to your external world. Instead of "balancing life and work," we say that people should live their all aspects of their lives in a "quality-of-life context." That is, work and life should co-exist with in a larger framework of being, thinking, feeling and action.

"Quality-of-Life Context" Inside and Out

"Quality of Life Context" is an experience—a way of being—defined by positive experiences in both internal and external dimensions of one's personal and organizational life:

Internal quality-of-Life experiences:

- Sense of self-worth, meaning, purposefulness, and fulfillment;

- Joy, inspiration, spaciousness, awe, and creativity;
- A motivating passion to serve; and
- Striving for integrity and excellence.

External quality-of-life experiences

- Sense of community, connection and partnership;
- Respect and caring about the well-being of others; and
- Stewardship responsibility for sustaining the natural and human resources in our world that contribute to quality of life around us.

As strategies for putting your work and life into balance, feeling positively about yourself and living a high-integrity life should not be taken as fluffy stuff, as some do. After all, if your life is out of balance, isn't the problem in the first place that you aren't feeling as good about yourself or your life as you'd like?

The more valid challenge is how to establish authentic self-affirming qualities for yourself, so that they really do make a positive difference, not only in how you feel, but in how you perform in all aspects of your life.

Living in a Quality of Life Context

We have identified at least seven principles that can guide you in creating a quality of life context for your own life. We present them here as bullet-points, with a brief application to work/life balance issues:

Seven Principles for Creating A Quality-of-Life Context.

- **Personal Vision.** Develop a clear sense of who you are and where you're headed . When your vision is well-articulated, you can express a more compelling and clear need for balance (i.e., your concerns are not misdirected or left unexpressed).
- **Roles and Identities.** Be aware of the different roles you play in life, and the rules associated with those roles . When you are conscious that you are playing a certain role at a given moment, then the "uncomfortable" rules associated with that role are somehow more tolerable and more easily changed.
- **Personal Foundation.** Take good care of your physical, emotional and spiritual Self . When all aspects of your being are in good shape, then you are more resilient against the anxieties of work/life imbalances.
- **Service.** Live and act with compassion for others . When you can truly understand where others are coming from, then you more likely to see and deal with what's motivating their intentions (especially those that are seemingly negative).
- **Relationship.** Create resourceful, productive and interdevelopmental relationships around you . When relationships around you are mutually nurturing, then you can more easily work with others to correct uncomfortable situations.
- **Action.** Take action that is responsive to the circumstances and in alignment with your needs . When you are responsive—not reactive—to situations, your decisions and actions are more assertive, straightforward and effective.

- **Destiny** Recognize that no matter what happens, you are still on life's path . When you experience life as your own inexorable journey of infinite possibility and personal potential, then upsetting circumstances become sources of learning and growth.

Discovering Your Own Quality of Life Context

To realize the full potential of the seven principles for creating a quality of life context, you will need to transform your experience of living, from the “either/or” framework we mentioned at the beginning of this article, to an inclusive holistic understanding of your life. Traditional cognitive formats (i.e. one-way lectures, textbook reading or multiple-choice tests) generally will not yield the required transformative results. You should be seeking experiential learning environments—retreats, workshops, seminars, etc. Such settings of “transformative education” facilitate deep personal insights and teach you to tap into and trust your intuitive wisdom—the capacity we all have for natural inner knowing.

Since the 1970's, research and discoveries in psychology, systems theory, change management and the new sciences, have shown conclusively that you *can* shift your experiential orientation to life in a way that generates greater fulfillment and satisfaction, while at the same time increasing personal performance and productivity. There are many transformative educational programs that you are likely to find locally and nationally—retreat centers or organizations. In the meantime, if this topic is of interest to you, you might enjoy reading from the following starter list of related texts.

Conclusion

Whatever mode of transformative learning you choose for setting your own quality-of-life context, you will very likely get in touch with whatever degree of passion you have for being a library worker. No matter how you feel about your job, and no matter how much or little balance you experience in your work/life, in library work you *are* indeed making a difference in the quality of other peoples' lives. Now, it's time to treat yourself to the same result!

*Burt Woolf is founder and chief principal of the **Center for Quality of Life**, which he founded in 2003 to nurture those who want to live and work in a quality-of-life context. Since 1974, he has facilitated, coached and advised people, teams, organizations and communities to achieve their full potential. He developed **Accelerated ConsensusT**, a citizen-based approach to strategic decision-making for improving quality of life in communities. His **Effortless LeadershipT** executive development programs help people re-discover their intuitive inner wisdom, so they can lead others productively, without struggle. Burt is also President of **QL Consulting, Inc.** in Amherst, Massachusetts, a national consulting practice that helps improve quality-of-life for people where they live, work, play, visit, and learn. You can view Burt's work at www.C4QL.org, and contact him by email at burt@C4QL.org*

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