Balancing acts

THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT IN ENABLING PROFESSIONALS' WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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Google "professionals" and "work-life balance" and you'll get over 14 million hits. Search Amazon.com and you'll turn up over 150 books on the topic. Work-life balance has for decades been a subject of both desire and debate. For the professional class—consultants, attorneys, physicians and the like, those who are always on the job, who are not supposed to "punch the clock," who are expected to care more and do more—the concept of work-life balance can seem a distant mirage, beckoning, yet ever out of reach.

Once upon a time, an "ideal worker" who could put work above all else might have existed—but good luck finding one today. When a professional's obligations were limited to the workplace and his (yes, his) spouse was at home—taking care of children, the home, as well as all the social obligations—the husband was able to make himself available for work at all times. The profile of today's typical family does not match this 1950s ideal. Many professionals have spouses who also work outside of the home, frequently in similarly demanding careers; others are single parents juggling the demands of raising a child alone; some take care of aging parents. There is little that is typical in today's households, and working professionals experience tremendous tensions between the pressure to "give their all" to their career and to make space for other commitments.

The myth of work-life balance is that it implies a fixed state and an equal distribution of time and attention between work and life outside of work. By conventional definition, work-life balance means working 40-hour-a-week jobs, maintaining regular schedules, and having plenty of uninterrupted time to spend with families and friends or on hobbies and personal pursuits. Today's professionals, however, do not expect 40-hour work weeks and recognize that the term "work-life balance" as conventionally defined does not work for their varied lives and careers. Rather, their sense of balance comes from their ability to control and adjust their work schedules to accommodate their needs and interests both inside and outside of work. They want the flexibility to be able to attend their children's sports games, take their spouses' out for their birthdays, and keep their commitments to their friends. They want to be able to work from home if they need to meet repairmen, to sustain an exercise regimen for their health, and engage in life enough to enjoy the financial rewards that come with working hard. They are as committed as ever to their jobs, but seek to demonstrate that commitment in ways that don't collapse their personal lives. The real meaning of work-life balance captures the sense of inner peace that accompanies allocation of time and attention in ways that are right for an individual.

How can professionals pursue work-life balance and gain control over their time? There is plenty of research to indicate that a supportive organizational culture is critical and that policies such as flexible work arrangements, required time off, and job shares can help. Many professionals, however, work in traditional firms in which, even if such policies exist, taking advantage of them may mean jeopardizing career success. They feel the need to show that they are committed and trustworthy by being available to respond to their clients and managers as needed—and they are expected to arrange their lives to make that possible. But, with equally pressing and complicated personal lives, can they? And, more importantly, should they?

ConsultCo: A case study

To find out, my colleague Emily Heaphy from Boston University and I interviewed 44 consultants: men and women, parents and non-parents, married, single and divorced; and two of their human resources executives. They all worked at different levels of hierarchy in North American offices of a prominent global consulting firm we call ConsultCo. Only three worked part-time, the others did not have any formal flexible arrangements and clocked on the average between 56 and 66 hours per week. We asked these consultants about their work-life balance and while some claimed a good sense of balance, others were miserable. What made the difference between these two opposite responses within the same firm? We found a critical distinction: who a consultant worked for determined the level of flexibility and control these professionals had over managing their time.

Management expertise

These differences reflect demonstration or absence of what we call "management expertise." Good managers, those whose actions facilitated consultants' ability to manage their time and balance their lives, manage processes so that they deliver good products to the clients and create a predictable and organized work environment with manageable stress levels for their subordinates. They set realistic expectations with clients and plan ahead. They also develop good relationships with their team members, show respect for them as whole people, and do not micromanage. They boost confidence of those who work for them instead

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of questioning their competence. They do not take for granted work beyond normal hours but instead show gratitude for extra effort.

Good managers and their teams do not underperform. They deliver the same high quality as their colleagues who believe that it is only possible when one sets no boundaries—but they do it without burning people out. Good managers consistently attract the best people and that, in turn, makes *their* work-life balance better. One partner observed that good subordinates "provide you with more leverage—you can do the work better, quicker, faster." To attract the best people, and for their own sanity, good managers are meticulous planners. One told us that she "put a lot of thought ahead of time into doing the project schedule, and really thinking through how long is that really going to take, how many people is it really going to need, what are the chances for us to get bottlenecked, what if this doesn't happen here, can I switch things around?" She also "ran a lot of interference with the client." This is hard work. This is management.

Poor managers, by contrast, don't prioritize anything but work. The don't plan ahead, making workflow unpredictable and therefore denying consultants the opportunity to control their own time. They don't place trust in their colleagues, tending to micromanage both their time and work. They are not clear about their expectations which often results in work needing to be redone, or done at the last minute. They expect all their subordinates to put work above everything else, no matter the day or time, showing no respect for people's obligations and commitments outside of the particular work project. Bart, one such manager, did not look at his subordinates' work until Friday night before a Monday presentation to the client. As he reviewed the consultant's work, he realized that he preferred a completely different approach, which required his team, including Kathleen who told us this story, to work the entire weekend. Bart knew that Kathleen's soon-to-be mother-in-law flew in from another continent for the weekend to meet her for the first time, but that did not affect his plans or his timing.

These clear differences between good managers and poor managers and their impact on the work-life balance of their consultants may make you wonder if and how individual consultants can gain control over whom they work for and how the cycle of poor management can continue within a firm if no one wants to work for the poor managers.

Jockeying for position

At ConsultCo, as at most similar firms, consultants work in transient teams and often on more than one team at a time. When a partner sells a new project, a team gets assembled. ConsultCo has a central system of allocating consultants to teams in ways that balance the developmental needs of the consultants with the needs for expertise for the project. The clients' interests are primary.

Despite this central assigning system, many consultants seek work informally. They find out who is good to work for and try to arrange to work for those people. They also find out who "kills their teams" or "boils the ocean"—an expression they use for managers who require endless information and thus create endless work—and do their absolute best to stay away from them.

What enables subordinates to get on teams with the good managers is their "content expertise," the analytical and content knowledge associated with being a consultant in a particular area, and the ability to convey that knowledge effectively to clients. Content expertise is highly valued at ConsultCo throughout the firm, and is the principle selling point for their projects with their clients. All managers want to have content experts on their teams in order to do good work and to have an easier time with supervision.

Moreover, content expertise is nurtured and developed. Even though many ConsultCo recruits have their MBAs, their senior colleagues recognize that they do not come into the firm with the skills they need to do their jobs well. As a consultant, "you learn as you go," they told us. More experienced consultants and good managers consider it part of their jobs to train their junior colleagues and develop their content expertise. However, when junior consultants are paired early on with poor managers, their ability to learn and grow is stifled, making it harder for them to develop the content expertise that would make them desirable for good managers. Many consultants left the firm after just one project with a poor manager.

Management expertise, unlike content expertise, is more ambiguously valued. How it is viewed varies from partner to partner. When looking at how partners and consultants team up, we discovered that not only did consultants seek out good managers, but good managers sought out consultants who were also good managers for their teams (teams have multiple

Management expertise:
Traits that facilitate or inhibit work-life balance

Good managers…

- Clarify client's expectations
- Set realistic and clear expectations with their team
- Plan ahead
- Organize work
- Push back on clients' unrealistic expectations
- Set goals and let their subordinates do their work
- Check-in with their team regularly
- Provide clear and constructive feedback
- Show gratitude when their subordinates go above and beyond
- Have explicit conversations about work styles
- Develop good relationships with their team

Poor managers…

- Assume what a client might want
- Say yes to all client demands, no matter the consequences for the team
- Require endless work and consider that the norm
- Disrespect their subordinates' non-work responsibilities and commitments
- React to client rather than plan with client
- Require significant last-minute work
- Do not get to know their team's strengths and developmental needs
- Micromanage

levels of hierarchy, so that the consultant who reports to a partner manages other consultants). As one ConsultCo manager says, "By earning a good reputation as being a good manager you have better access to good people wanting to work for you….Whereas if you're really kind of a difficult manager, nobody wants to keep working for you, so you have to keep starting anew." At ConsultCo, there is no formal training for management expertise—training programs had existed in the past, but ConsultCo eliminated them as part of cost-cutting.

Subsidizing bad managers

How can these bad managers staff their teams, if everyone is trying to avoid them? In a firm where information flows freely and people have the ability to influence who they work for, poor managers should be unable to staff their teams. But when it looks like that might happen, the formal assigning system saves the bad managers and reinforces the sense that management skills are secondary, and not truly important.

The firm's rationale is not hard to recognize: if a partner is bringing in lucrative contracts and large projects, he or she should get the people to complete the work, even if they "eat them up and spit them out," in the words of one partner.

These same poor managers get promoted and rewarded, "despite the fact that they kill their teams," as one of our interviewees lamented, confirming what we heard from many others. A human resources executive told us that she would love to say "look, partner, don't sell that anymore… it takes a huge toll on our people" but that economically, this is not possible. In addition, people notice that no one is really penalized for "killing the team" and conclude that it must be all right to do so.

Focusing solely on incoming revenue generated by the partners, ConsultCo ignores the repercussions and real financial costs of the turmoil the poor management they allow causes through higher turnover and extended and unplanned time off due to stressed-out workers.

What's management got to do with it?

So this makes me think. Maybe we need to go back to the basics and teach managers how to manage instead of assuming that they already know how. Maybe we need to recognize that management is a skill as relevant and as critical as knowing how to work with spreadsheets and create slide decks. And maybe organizations need to take responsibility for developing management skills and for holding managers accountable for practicing them. ■