

Handling the next generation of leaders' demand for work-life balance

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As if the demographic shift that puts employees in the driver's seat isn't challenging enough, the labour shortage is being compounded by another major issue — work-life balance.

It's an issue that now concerns all generations. Aging baby boomers want to experience life outside of work and Gen Xers are increasingly seeking to capture time with their young families. For Gen Ys, there is no delay. They demand balance from day one and are not willing to wait until they have paid their dues to get it.

Yet anyone who has had a successful career knows making it to the top requires a willingness to sacrifice, an ability to stretch beyond one's comfort zone, energy and focus to develop effective leadership skills.

When asked to evaluate whether they've achieved work-life balance, leaders

frequently qualify their responses by providing their own definitions of what this means. Ann Dowsett Johnston, vice-president of communications and alumni relations at Montreal's McGill University, put it this way: "I have learned to choose sequential balance ... In a high-powered career you can have it all; you just can't have it all at once."

Fast Company's editor Keith Hammonds had it right when he wrote "Balance is Bunk" in the magazine's October 2004 issue: "The great fallacy is not that we aspire to accomplishment but that we aspire to everything else, too. Unwilling to prioritize among things that all seem important, we instead invent for ourselves the possibility of having everything"

Steve Phinney, senior vice-president, corporate services at Toronto-based Progistix Solutions Inc., said although he believes work-life balance is unachievable, it should be an ideal that people work to-

wards.

"Yet, I am constantly coming across employees believing that they can achieve it, adding pressure to their lives and feeling that they are failures when they don't get there," said Phinney. "Instead I think we would do much better to question the underlying causes for the lack of balance and try to understand why we make the choices we do make. Once we understand the causes we need to come to terms with them."

So how can future leaders be convinced they can't necessarily have it all? The answer is to teach them they can, over time, but in order to do so they must be willing to recognize what work-life balance realistically means and then learn to apply the tools and strategies that enable them to make informed choices about their careers.

Among a number of up-and-coming leaders interviewed for this article, the consensus was that their work-life balance is "atrocious." Furthermore, they

believe business schools created "an alpha male expectation which is quickly eroded by companies where work is basic, boring and repetitive."

Some of the burden has to be placed on their own unrealistic expectations and some on organizations where commitment to employee development is contingent on fluctuating business performance and coaching fresh recruits is often hit and miss in the hands of untrained managers. One hard-working, career-focused, Gen Y banking employee voiced a prevailing sentiment when she said, "I think companies could demonstrate their support for employee loyalty by making coaching available to us the same way that they make it available to the more senior ranks."

Organizations have the responsibility to ensure high-potential employees are prepared for what to expect, how to navigate competing work and life

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demands and how to manage effectively, efficiently and with great results. The return on investment, when done properly, is unmistakable. Employees who clearly recognize they have a choice regarding how they invest their time and energy and where their careers could conceivably lead will feel empowered and in control.

They will also appreciate that to reach their goals they must live each chapter of their lives with clear actionable plans for attaining their preferred future while achieving results for the organization. The benefits for the employer are greater employee commitment, increased productivity, lower turnover rates and reduced recruitment costs.

What are the critical elements of these “balance programs,” the ones that

are being considered high priority across generations and key requirements for attracting and retaining the next generation of leaders? The best practices are focused on managing high performance and maintaining equilibrium between employee and employer responsibilities. They probe for employees’ values and how these drive both employee engagement and long-term career goals.

They help individuals set goals, create action plans and use time and energy management tools to sustain overall performance. They reinforce training with followup coaching sessions to ensure new, effective habits are put into practice. And they train managers with techniques for successfully coaching their own teams.

Key components of all successful programs are the inclusion of methodologies that enable individu-

als to:

- identify their values, both motivators and interests;
- clarify what they are seeking in all aspects of their lives, in their careers and beyond;
- allow them to make informed choices about the paths they choose; and
- develop a strategic plan to get there.

For those who aspire to be at the top, there will be a deeper recognition of the drivers for achieving this goal, a greater acceptance of the personal sacrifices that must be made along the way and recognition this is a deliberate choice and a trade-off for the ultimate prize.

Establishing programs and structures that help people better manage work-life balance is not only the right thing to do financially, but it is also the prudent thing to do. By enabling the new generation of employees to gain a real-

istic perspective on what is required to achieve their own goals and offering them tools to ascertain and then manage work-life balance as new priorities emerge, they will be on the path to becoming the future leaders organizations are seeking. In addition, they will be able to model for their own teams that they also have choices, and, in the process of doing so, help to replace the culture of entitlement with one of empowerment and full engagement.

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