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Lead the Way: Mastering the Balancing Act of Work-Life Balance

Skills and Professional Development





Before you finish reading this, what's the likelihood that you will pick up your phone to respond to a ding or beep? How often have you done that in a meeting? Or once you've arrived home at the end of already long day, while you are talking to your spouse or kids? Phones are fantastic devices and powerful tools that put the world at our fingertips and have the potential to make our lives easier. At the same time, they also can extend our workdays, making us continuously accessible to our employers and clients.

As much as we like to think we are indispensable, the world will not come to an end because we occasionally take ourselves offline. And we need to take ourselves offline.

We tend to see overworking as just that "thing we do." However, we are creating stressful environments that don't serve us, and, in fact, studies have shown that long-term overworking can lead to a host of conditions, which include insomnia, depression, anxiety, high-blood pressure, and more. Our self-created stress is as harmful as secondhand smoke. This "thing we do" is killing us — and to what benefit? No job is worth compromising our health or family relationships.

For most of us, when we were in school, whether college or law school, it was the activity that commanded the most attention. But as we've matured, the responsibilities and activities requiring our attention spread beyond work. We now have families, bills, and community service to juggle, not to mention finding time for our own health and enjoying other relationships. But how?

It starts with letting go of the notion that being a lawyer requires us to give up a life outside of work.

Yes, it's demanding. And at times stressful. However, we have the choice of whether to give in to that mindset. And I don't only mean as it relates to our time. It also demands our energy as well.

If you are not able to discuss changes to your work conditions so that you can inject more balance into your life, then it becomes imperative that you create an environment in the other parts of your life that allows you to take care of yourself first. Remember the admonition to put your own oxygen mask on first, then help your children and others, so that you have something to give.

Balance is not about having equal energy or time for everything you do. It is about self-care and understanding and living your priorities, which of course starts with identifying your priorities.

Many of us live our lives either by default or by living someone else's dreams. Being a lawyer is a fantastic profession. We are rewarded with financial benefits, prestige, and the ability to make a difference in the lives of our clients and the world around us. At the same time, these privileges are not without cost.

What are a few practical things we can do that will help us establish a bit more equilibrium in our lives? Here are five: unplug, move, play, meditate, and protect.

Unplug. It is important to unplug the phone, laptop, TV, and any other electronic gadgets that keep you from having time to think and be. On a daily basis — it doesn't have to be for a long time — plan for some extended periods of screen-free time.

Move. So, what should you do with the extra time you discover once you've unplugged? Well, start with moving. I could have said exercise, but I'm already aware that suggesting you unplug may be more than you can handle out of the gate. Just move. Take a walk, a hike, or go for a bike ride.

Have fun. You could also make room in your life for some fun. What did you enjoy doing as a kid? You could combine fun with the moving and go roller skating or play a game of tennis. Or you could get in touch with your artistic side and paint a picture. Visit a museum or art gallery. The opportunities are endless.

Meditate. Taking any of the above and turning it into a meditation session is simple. Whether you use guided meditation or just sit on your own is up to you. Meditation is a great stress reducer and chance to get in touch with what you desire deep down.

Protect. Your goal is to identify what is important to you and put boundaries around it so that those things are not constantly put on the back burner. Feelings of stress and anxiety occur when we don't have the resources we need. Giving yourself a chance to relax and revitalize helps to keep the buildup of stress to a minimum.

The good news here is that none of these things (and there are many more that I haven't mentioned) requires you to spend money or take a trip anywhere, so there are no real excuses on why you can't do them. While you may not get all the balance you desire, it's a start. The space created may allow you to think about what other steps you can take to move to a lifestyle that is more reflective of the balance you desire.

For more on bringing balance to your life, check out my free webinar, the "Art of Work-Life Balance".

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the Lead the Way column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.