

This is the Life

Structuring a life that supports both/and in an either/or world

TEXT BY CHRISTINE MACLEAN ILLUSTRATION BY NIGEL BUCHANAN JANUARY 14, 2009

ONE QUESTION SURVEY

What's your favorite trick for achieving more work/life balance? (Choose one)

- Just saying no to outside commitments.
- Outsourcing chores etc. as much as possible.
- Maintaining firm boundaries between work and family--no working from home or online shopping from work.
- Using my calendar to commit time where I want it.
- Not thinking about it at all.

Here's my vote

REACT TO THIS STORY

Agree? Disagree? Stop sounding off to your computer screen! Instead, share your point of view on this subject with our readers.

Jump to react



JUGGLE THIS

Give me another

TELL A FRIEND

You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

Show me the way

For the last 12 years, John and Emily Armstrong have been seasonal stay-at-home parents. During the school year, Emily teaches and John stays at home with their daughters, who are now 12, 9, and 7. He cooks, cleans, and gets the girls to and from school and activities. Every year during the second week of June, Emily and John completely switch roles. John, a carpenter, goes to work and Emily focuses on the children and homemaking, except for cooking dinner; they both agree somewhere along the way John became the better cook.

When they first started doing it, "it seemed like a temporary plan," says Emily, who teaches high school English in Holland, Michigan. "But as time went on, it became the way we lived because it worked." While neither claim it's perfect--the transitions are still hard, even though everyone knows what to expect--the result is a low-stress life, overall.

That's because work/life balance is built right into the structure. Often couples will try to achieve work/life balance through things like vowing to leave work by 6:30 every evening or not taking their computers on vacation. While these tactics can ease the stress, they are a Band-Aid approach when what's really needed is an entirely new system.

Coming up with that system and putting it in place requires significant changes, including the courage to define success for yourself, the inner strength to let go of roles, and the resourcefulness to pull it off, not to mention the chutzpah to believe it's possible. You'll also need a partner who is just as serious creating a life structured to support balance as you are. If you don't have that, then the Band-Aid approach is probably the best you can do.

The only definition of success that matters: Yours

If both partners are committed to the idea, the first change required is to let go of culture's definition of success and craft your own. You have to believe there is more to life than what you do for a living and how much you make--or, conversely, that there's more to life than parenting.

Marc Vachon is co-founder with his wife, Amy, of EquallySharedParenting, a resource for couples in which both partners want to be equal breadwinners and parents. He was working and attending a nighttime MBA program when he started asking himself, "What do I want to be doing on Tuesday?" "Seldom was the answer that I wanted to be at work," says Vachon, who decided he wasn't willing to miss out on the "long list of other things people always say they don't have time for." He wanted to structure his life in such a way that he could find fulfillment in many areas, including work, family, community, and hobbies.

Vachon sought out a spouse who wanted that kind of life, too. Now he and Amy each work 32 hours/week, he in IT and she in healthcare, and they each stay home on a different day of the week, minimizing the amount of time their kids spend in childcare and maximizing the opportunity for them to pursue other interests like playing the violin and woodworking. "We want career level jobs," Marc says, "and we're willing to take a slight hit for working fewer hours," like earning less and fewer opportunities for advancement.

Limitations are not failings

Another thing that needs to change is how we feel about our limitations. "When we're not aware of limitations, we experience them as personal failings," says Steven Krugman, a Boston clinical psychologist who specializes in helping people through times of transition.

Resist the mass media's message that you can do it all well, he advises, and get real. Accept that you--just like everyone else--have limitations and have to make tradeoffs.

"Relationships require time. Parenting requires time. And the idea that we can do them on the run or by appointment doesn't work out so well," says Krugman. One way of countering those messages is to talk to people around you about how their lives work, preferably those older than you who can give you some perspective and a reality check. There is enormous relief and comfort in knowing other people struggle with the same things you are, and that no one figures it all out in an hour.

"We" not "me"

Just as important as defining success for yourself and letting go of the idea you can do it all well is adapting a team perspective, i.e., "Between the two of us, we have a pool of resources; how do we best allocate them?" "Work from the position that there is fun to be had in all different domains instead of just in your own turf," says Vachon, who with Amy is writing a book about work/life balance.

Krugman says young parents, especially, find themselves in competition with each other. "It's not a zero-sum game," he says. "Couples need to think of it as 'how can we maximize our joint experience' rather than 'you must give this up for me.'"

If women believe they are just as responsible as their partners for bringing in money and men believe they are as responsible as their partners for keeping the home fires burning, "that allows you to optimize all of life rather than maximizing any one particular part of life, like your income," says Vachon.

For the team approach to be successful, both partners need to be role-neutral--no turf-guarding allowed. While they are loosening, social norms don't support role ambidexterity, as the Armstrongs can attest. "Early on, I wouldn't like what John would dress the baby in," says Emily, who felt like the baby's mismatched clothing would reflect poorly on her. "But I knew I had to let go of that. Even if it's not what people think it should be, that's okay with me." And once when the girls were little, a man yelled a demeaning remark at John, who was carrying one of the girls in a front pack while walking the oldest to school. ("As I recall, the front pack wasn't very masculine," says John. "I think it was pink.")

Where's the blueprint?

Breaking free of norms is one major element in building a life you want. Imagining the way forward is another. "There is no one prescriptive path, so you need to dream beyond what you see in the world," says Vachon, who has talked to many couples who are finding creative solutions to work/life balance. Among them are a husband and wife who each started their own business and now work half days so one of them is always home with the kids. Another couple negotiated with their employers to have every other Friday off, reduced hours at reduced pay. While it might have a small negative impact on their careers, it's having a big positive impact on their family life.

Where are these jobs? They don't exist--until people create them for themselves by going to their managers and asking for more flexibility, just like the couples Vachon talked to have.

These couples don't reach their full potential for income, but it's a tradeoff they're okay with because it meets their definition of success. In the Armstrong family's case, it's "a long-term sense of wellbeing in my kids, a feeling they take with them through life," says John.

Achieving a life structured to allow time for work, family, relaxation, and community may seem like a gargantuan task, and it is, but you don't have to get there all at once. "Take baby steps in that direction," says Vachon. "If the woman is home with the kids, can she start to ramp up her career? Can the man restructure his work a little?"

"Nothing I'm saying is easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is."

Christine MacLean writes about and analyzes issues related to work/life balance more than is probably healthy.

REACT TO THIS STORY

Your message

Name (required) E-mail (required)
Title Company

Reactions, which may be edited for length, will appear within a few days. Please be respectful of others. Please be brief. Bonus points for making your point *and* making us smile.

Forcing you to leave your e-mail address makes you nervous, right? It's the editor's fault. She wants to be able to contact you if she needs clarification on your reaction.

Send

Reactions to "This is the Life"

Excellent ideas that I believe really work. Writing out your plan will increase the possibility of it becoming a succes by 97% according to a study by Harvard Business School some 25 years ago.

gary beckman
Sales Associate, Coldwell Banker Woodland Schmidt Realtors

Great article for this time. The economy gives us reason to reevaluate what money's really worth--beyond meeting basic needs. Hmmm. Maybe it's reevaluating "basic needs" that we all have the opportunity to do.

Edith Pierce
Partner

I enjoyed your article and think many people can relate. Work/life balance is the issue that many families have on the top of their list right now. I write on this topic and am promoting "family first entrepreneurship" as a solution. My book ONO that comes out in March defines this and I'm rooting that we all make a difference in American families through mutual support. Good on ya. You're making a difference.

marc warnke
marcwarnke.com, ONO Inc.

These are great examples of "family focused entrepreneurs." Most people work very hard for their families, but for me, there is no greater sadness than seeing families left behind in the wake of a "successful" entrepreneur.

Going against social norms, taking risks, being flexible, and agreeing on true success for your family are not easy, but the results are well worth it.

Mike Stuart

