

Leadership lessons

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Fostering work-life balance takes honesty, openness

As one year draws to a close and we embark upon another, we often find ourselves in a reflective mood. Many in the workplace tend to reflect upon how they divide their time and energy between work and interests outside of work. Indeed, the notion of work-life balance has become one of the most talked-about and least-resolved issues in organizations today.

A study commissioned by the federal government determined that 64 per cent of Canadians struggle to find a balance between work and personal life, and 90 per cent of working adults are concerned about not spending enough time with their families.

And increasingly we are finding that there is a cost to this lack of balance. The **Conference Board of Canada** estimates that the difficulties employees have in balancing work with family life costs employers \$2.7 billion annually. Furthermore, workplace stress and stress-related illness cost the Canadian economy \$5 billion each year.

Work-life balance also has a significant impact on attracting and retaining talent. For many employees, the ability to balance work with personal life is a key factor in choosing an employer. In fact, people are leaving higher-paying jobs in search of employers that offer family benefits, flex time, family-related leave, compressed time and job security. Companies with non-flexible timetables are cutting themselves out of 30 per cent of the recruitment market.

Most organizations acknowledge that the work-life conflict is a problem, but struggle to address it. Organizational values may speak the language of balance, but often those working the longest hours are rewarded, while senior managers preach balance but work weekends.

This issue is complex, but certainly not insurmountable. We have seen capable and honest leaders create healthy organizations in which work-life balance becomes a reality for all employees. These employers of choice support and practise balance and create a work environment where performance versus presence is rewarded, where the focus is on output versus hours. This requires taking a long hard look at what people are doing. One study conducted in 1999 determined that half the decisions made in organizations fail due to managers who impose solutions, limit the search for alternatives and use power to implement their plans. Another study completed last year suggests that only 10 per cent of managers are focused and purposeful and work effectively.

Leadership development throughout the organization can play a key role in addressing work-life balance by helping managers bring out excellence in direct reports, listen and communicate more effectively and consequently reduce the number of ineffective decisions. In addition, it can help everyone become more focused and shift the culture of the organization from busy work to effective work.

Ultimately, finding balance is a personal issue. Individuals need to define sharp, clear boundaries for themselves, become intensely focused on what can get done within these boundaries and be willing to challenge their organization's cultural norms. This requires accepting personal responsibility and taking the initiative.