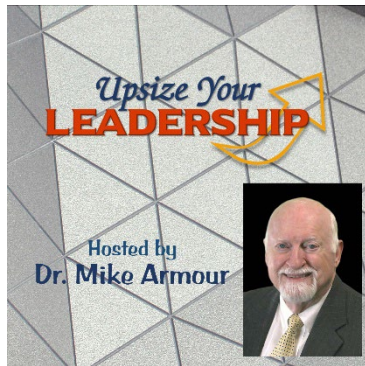


The Elusive Balance Between Work and Family Life

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2211

Podcast Date: May 18, 2022



In the past few weeks, I've had a surge of executives and managers seek me out for a coaching engagement. I'm adding clients more quickly than in any similar period in over 20 years.

But I'm also seeing a pattern in these engagements which is more pronounced than I've ever seen before. An unusually high percentage of these clients are asking for assistance in establishing a better work-family life balance. And if managers and executives are looking for greater balance in this part of their life, it's a pretty sure bet that their people are also struggling with their own work-family life balance.

As leaders we need to be attuned to discovering greater balance ourselves, but also helping our people find it. In this podcast I want to give you a broader perspective on the work-family life balance challenge than you've probably encountered before. I want to put the entire issue in a new light. And in doing so, I hope to underscore how urgently and purposefully every one of us should be working to improve this balance.

And I want you to notice that I'm using the term "work-family life" balance, not the more common "work-life" balance. Work-family life balance, of course, is simply a special case of what we call "work-life" balance. But it is such an important element of work-life balance, that it deserves singular attention and analysis. Even if you are single, the only person in your household, the subject of work-family life balance should be a concern, because you need to understand how it impacts the morale and effectiveness of those you lead. Help them to achieve greater work-family life balance, and you are certain to upsize your leadership.

Maintaining work-family life balance is a uniquely modern issue. Until the last ten decades of so, it was never a topic of discussion. Not that family was unimportant to earlier generations of workers. But the structure of work itself never made it an issue.

Let me explain by surveying our own history as a nation. The American census in 1910 was a watershed moment. For the first time in U.S. history, the number of people living in urban communities outnumbered those in rural communities. This happened, in large part, because of the rapid industrialization of the preceding century – especially the last half of the nineteenth century. Factories, many of them employing hundreds of workers, tended to locate near large towns and cities which provided an abundant workforce and easy access to rail and/or water transportation. Jobs in the factories, in turn, attracted even more people to urban neighborhoods.

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What this means is that until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of workers earned their living in agriculture or small-town retail. They either lived in settings remote from the nearest neighbors or in small towns like the one in which I spent my childhood, where the entire economy depended on nearby farming and ranching operations – most of them family owned.

And that's a key fact. Today with the infusion of vast corporate ownership into American agriculture, family farms are a disappearing institution in our country. Historically, however, farming and ranching were a family business. And I don't mean that the family happened to live on their farm. No, the family itself did the farming. Dad, Mom, and all the kids old enough to do chores were essential hands in planting, tending, and harvesting crops or working the livestock on a daily basis. They were all unsalaried workers in a family business.

Work life was therefore family life. I grew up in a family like that. Ours was the last home in the city limits of a town of 4000 people. Even though we were technically "in town," we ran cattle on pastures immediately behind our house, stored hay and milked cows in a barn directly across the road from our house, and farmed the hillside that rose just east of our house. Planting season was a family activity. Harvesting was a family activity. Slaughtering hogs or taking crops to market or hauling steers to a cattle auction were all family activities. There was no divorce between work and family.

I should add that this life style was rapidly vanishing by the time I came along. Our family and our town were something of a holdover from a way of life more characteristic of an earlier era. From growing up in that setting, however, I came to understand that vanishing way of life firsthand. As a result, I can see the bold contrast between today's households and those which once prevailed across America. And in that contrast are the roots of the work-family balance challenge presented by the modern workplace.

In that earlier era which was passing away, the long hours of family members working alongside one another doubled as family time. Dad and Mom telling stories about their younger days or about members of an extended family whom the kids may have never met. Parents sharing nuggets of wisdom or practical advice with their sons and daughters as family members conversed while working. Even sharing jokes with one another to relieve the boredom of what was sometimes rather tedious or unstimulating work. No one thought of these hours as contributing to work-family life balance. They were just part of being a family.

Now, because this type of lifestyle was already becoming unusual in my youth, few of my friends were growing up in farm families. In fact, some of my peers thought it a bit odd that I milked a cow or two every morning before school. Still, many of them were from families which also blended work and family life. In small towns like ours, retail stores were usually a family business. It was much like what you see of the Olsen family if you watch television re-runs of *Little House on the Prairie*. Mom and Dad ran the business, and the kids all had cleaning and stocking chores around the store. That business profile was commonplace where I grew up.

But not just in my hometown. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, small town businesses were largely family enterprises. As with farming, the demarcation between work life and family life was rather indistinct. In my town there were family-owned and family-run clothing stores, hardware stores, gasoline stations, bakeries, corner groceries, dry cleaners, pharmacies, and eating establishments, among other businesses. There was no pressure to create work-family life balance because work and family were so thoroughly integrated.

Not every commercial or organizational venture, to be sure, was a family enterprise. Over half the town worked for an employer outside of their kinship circle. But there were no long commutes to work. There were no frustrating traffic jams both going and coming. Even when members of a family went separate ways for work or school, they could leave the house only fifteen or twenty minutes before starting time. And once their school day or work day was over, they were back home in a matter of minutes. For several years, I was even able to go home for lunch, if I wanted. The school's midday break was purposefully long enough to accommodate that option.

Industrialization and urbanization changed all of that. Now, rather than Mom and Dad working a farm together or running a business together, they each travel for miles, probably in different directions, to their distinctly different places of work, perhaps with shifts which are awkwardly out of sync with one another, while the kids go in equally different directions to classroom settings. Mornings are so chaotic and time-pressured that there's little or no opportunity for quality family time to start the day. And by the time the family regathers in the evening, everyone is worn down by what the day has thrown at them. No one brings his or her best game to the evening's family time.

Moreover, think about the contrast between today's commuting culture and an earlier era when travel time was also extended family time. In an age when travel was primarily by horseback, wagon, or buggy – or just as often, by foot – travel time was unhurried. The distance between Dallas and Fort Worth, today a half-hour journey, took most of a day when the two cities were frontier towns. Families going anywhere, therefore, spent large blocks of time in one another's company, moving at an unhurried pace, conversing, bonding, and in the process, growing closer. Travel time was family time.

In a word, the modern world has been unfriendly to families. It is structured and paced to keep them isolated from one another for wholesale portions of every work day. Like the proverbial frog in the pot of water being heated up, people tolerated this situation and made their peace with it for decades. In increasing numbers, however, they want career and job profiles that allow them the family time which the modern world has snatched from them.

One consequence of the COVID pandemic is that it accelerated this trend. People who had never considered working from home were suddenly forced to do so. And large numbers of them came to enjoy it. Not because it allowed them to slack off because they had no direct supervision. It's generally conceded that productivity remained high – or was even higher – when people worked remotely. And for workers, this arrangement regained two hours per day by not facing a commute. They came to enjoy the flexibility of starting work whenever they wanted. And because schools were relying on remote learning, parents could interact with their children several times a day around the house.

For millions of people, this experience led to renewed awareness that, with all of its conveniences and comforts, modern life has exacted a telling toll on quality family life. As people now return to more conventional work schedules and settings, they do so with a fresh desire to balance work and family life in a way that is more rewarding. Of course, for many jobs, if not most, working remotely is no option. The demands of the job require an in-person presence.

The challenge before managers and executives, therefore, is to find ways to address worker yearning for a better work-family life balance. And this yearning is particularly strong among today's youngest workers. More so than the generations ahead of them, they are unwilling to

sacrifice quality family time to a job simply because it pays well, has tremendous promotion potential, or looks great on a resume. I could go on at length with stories I myself know of younger workers opting for a less glamorous standard of living if it gives them more time for their families.

Those of us in management positions are ill-advised to ignore this press for greater work-family life balance. It's not a passing fad. And even if we do not address this issue ourselves, our competition is likely to do so. Job vacancies are so extensive today that entrepreneurs and corporate entities are highly motivated to find innovative ways to attract additional workers. As companies discover new ways to assure a better balance between work and family life, those employers who have left this balance unaddressed will find it harder and harder to attract the workers they need.

This does not mean that I'm advocating an effort to reprofile every job so people can work remotely. I've already alluded to the fact that this simply is not practical for the vast majority of jobs. But other accommodations may be workable. Flexible work hours is one solution which thousands of businesses are experimenting with. More generous personal time off policies are another. Then there are job-sharing arrangements, where two part-time workers divide the duties of a job between them and then work alternating schedules to assure that these duties are adequately covered at all times. Parents whose children have special needs are frequently attracted to arrangements like this, because they can have both a job and more free time for family responsibilities. I'm also finding that job-sharing is increasingly popular among older adults who have demanding care-provider responsibilities for a frail parent or a disabled spouse.

The approaches which I've just outlined are ones which have already been deployed. I'm certain that innovative companies will develop other means of affording workers ways to achieve greater work-family life balance. The pressure for this accommodation will not wane soon.

Are there workers who will take advantage of us if we offer special arrangements along these lines? Probably so. Experience tells us, however, that these workers are a distinct minority. People eager for more quality time for their families tend to reciprocate with loyalty and commitment to an employer who provides them that benefit.

Families are the foundation on which all human societies are built. The modern world has done its utmost to weaken or even destroy family structures. When we devote ourselves to helping our people find more quality time to strengthen their family, we are not only taking steps to improve worker morale and productivity. We are also contributing to making families – and therefore American society – a healthier place to live.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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