Taking the Initiative

Misconception: *I must wait for someone else—my manager, or human resources, or prospective employer—to solve my work/life conflict.*

Reality: *I can take the initiative and do the work to create and propose a better work+life fit.*

When it comes to influencing the way work fits into their lives, most people feel powerless. They are paralyzed by the belief that someone else needs to hand them a solution. Chances are, you’re no different. If you already have a job, you look to your manager or human resources to solve your conflict. And if they don’t, you simmer in resentful misery or you leave. “I would love to have stayed with my job after (insert work/life event of your choice), but they never offered me a different arrangement, so I had to leave.” If I had a dollar for every time I heard that statement over the years, I’d be a wealthy woman.

Or if you’re looking for a job, you assume the description of a potential opportunity is nonnegotiable and wait for the person hiring to offer an alternative. If he or she doesn’t, you either decline the opportunity or accept it “as is,” knowing full well that you’re walking straight into work/life conflict.

In fact, this sense of powerlessness is so common that when I run workshops it doesn’t take very long before at least one person becomes visibly disturbed as they quickly face two realities.
First, they realize that I won’t be handing them a solution tailored to their unique work/life conflict. And second, while I will give them a framework within which to create a solution themselves, they are going to have to do the work. You see, for many it seems easier and much less scary if someone else finds the answer to their work/life conflict, even if it will most likely fail because:

- No one knows the realities in your work and personal life better than you do; therefore, how could anyone else possibly develop your solution?
- Managers have way too much on their plates already to be saddled with solving your work/life conflict. They typically support your new work+life fit as long as it doesn’t mean more work for them; and
- Finally, while there are exceptions in a number of forward-thinking organizations, human resource departments, unfortunately, in most instances aren’t able to address work/life issues in a strategic, customized way. This is particularly true in small and mid-sized companies without the resources to devote solely to work/life initiatives.

Like it or not, only you know how work needs to fit into your life given your work and personal realities. Only you can negotiate the appropriate work+life fit with your manager or prospective employer and manage it day in and day out. And only you can enjoy the sense of empowerment and fulfillment that comes from resolving your own conflict.

Let’s look first at your manager’s perspective. Like most of the managers I’ve met, chances are your manager already has enough to deal with without having to sit down to figure out exactly what you need. Plus, how is she supposed to understand all of the relevant personal realities—your work+life vision, your finances, your partner’s schedule—which affect your work+life fit? She can’t.

You need to have some compassion for the position most man-
agers are in today. Not only are they responsible for managing a large number of direct reports, but they often handle direct client or product responsibility as well. I know this was the case for me when I worked in banking. In addition to supervising the work of a unit of account officers and support staff, I was responsible for managing my own portfolio of accounts. Needless to say, this didn’t leave a lot of extra time to tailor individual work+life fit solutions for each one of my employees.

You may be saying, “Okay, if my manager can’t give me the answer, I’ll go to human resources. They’ll tell me what to do.” Unfortunately, as I noted earlier, human resources in most companies is probably even less likely to tailor a work+life fit that meets both your needs and the needs of the business. Why? First, think about the basic role of HR in any organization. It is to create and administer the fewest number of policies that apply to the largest number of employees. In other words, their job is uniformity and standardization where at all possible.

But uniformity and standardization are antithetical to creativity, which is critical when developing a new work+life fit. In addition, many, but not all, human resource departments see work/life initiatives solely in terms of policies and programs, rather than as a strategic management tool to be used to enhance productivity and profits. Although human resource executives say that they are responsible for recruiting, retaining, and increasing productivity of employees, only 1% believes that work/life initiatives are an important tactic for accomplishing those goals. They see it as an accommodative policy and not a strategic management tool. Therefore, it’s not surprising that they often can’t articulate the business case strongly enough to get management to buy in.

This doesn’t mean that HR isn’t important in helping you to take the initiative to create and implement your own work+life fit. HR may not be able to give you the answer, but it can help create a supportive environment within which you can confidently approach your manager to discuss your work/life issues. HR can also offer manager
training and incentives that encourage managers to work toward a solution with you, as well as provide child care, elder care, and other programs that support the implementation of your work+life fit. And you should absolutely use HR for those purposes.

Let’s look at one more reason why you might be holding out hope that someone will take you by the hand and offer a solution. Employee loyalty. On one level, employee loyalty is very admirable and important. But on another level it’s misguided, especially as it relates to work+life fit. What do I mean by misguided? I’m talking about a misplaced sense of loyalty that causes you to expend time and energy at work that you would prefer to devote to your personal life, because you trust that “they’ll take care of me.” Economic history, both past and present, illustrates time and again that your company won’t.

In recent years, we’ve witnessed that when economic forces dictate, companies will expand and contract their workforce without giving much thought to employee loyalty. And in this high-tech age of globalization, this pattern of expansion and contraction is likely to continue. Therefore, out of necessity, employer loyalty is, and will most likely continue to be, conditional, and there will be a continuing move away from job security.

Therefore, employees should be loyal and committed to their companies, but conditionally as well—the condition being you will work for them as long as you are given support and respect to negotiate and achieve your desired work+life fit. Because the reality is that “jobs are less secure, more demanding, more time-consuming, and more hectic, which leads to less employee satisfaction with their (work+life fit).”

This is a wake-up call to realize that personal relationships and supports are really the only constant in today’s ever-changing globalized world. And making them strong does require an investment of time and energy outside of work. Unfortunately, most working people fail to make the choices that ensure they have the time and energy they need.

In focus groups, people use very personal language to describe how they feel about their company, such as “We’re like family” or “I love my company.” In fact, more than 73% of employees say they are
either very or extremely loyal to their employers. This is in spite of the fact that:

- One-third of these same employees feel they are likely to lose their jobs in the next couple of years; and
- Almost two-thirds feel they have little chance for advancement.

In other words, although employees do understand that their employer’s loyalty is conditional, they still offer unconditional loyalty in return. And only 15% of employees say they are likely to make a genuine effort to find another job in the next year.

Let’s reframe these percentages in terms of a personal relationship. You are dating someone. Not only do you feel that there is a 30% chance this person will leave you in the next two years, but that there is a 60% chance they will never marry you. Regardless, a majority of the time you feel very or extremely loyal to this person, and you only consider looking for a new relationship 15% of the time.

Does this sound like a healthy, mutually beneficial partnership? If you wouldn’t put up with this type of unbalanced relationship in your personal life, why would you in your work life? Perhaps you do “love” your work environment and consider your colleagues to be “family.” There’s nothing wrong with that; however, if you choose not to pursue a better work+life fit out of this sense of love and loyalty for your employer, your affection may be a bit misplaced.

Hopefully, you’re beginning to see why it’s incumbent upon you to take the lead on your own behalf. Use your dedication and commitment to your company as incentive and leverage to achieve the work+life fit that you want, not as an excuse to muddle along despite unresolved conflict.

ALLISON’S STORY

Allison, a mid-level marketing manager at a large Fortune 500 manufacturing company, is overwhelmed. After having her daughter Janet
a year ago, she returned to her job full-time and continued to participate in a community volunteer organization to which she devotes about 20 hours a month. Because she loves her job and her volunteer work, she has tried to give them the same amount of time and energy that she did before Janet was born. But she loves Janet too. And she’s finding that there simply isn’t enough time and energy to give her at the end of the day. Too often she kisses Janet at bedtime and realizes she hasn’t spent one minute on the floor just playing with her. And she can’t remember when she last had a complete conversation with her husband.

There are days when she sits at her desk and realizes she’s been staring at the same proposal for an hour. And instead of looking forward to her volunteer work reading to the kids at the battered women’s shelter, she resents it and finds herself rushing to finish the books. Then there are the days she just cries; cries driving to work, in the bathroom stall, making dinner.

She thinks to herself, “Can’t anyone see I need a break? Why doesn’t my manager tell me to leave early? He keeps saying how glad he is to have me back, but can’t he see I’m losing it? I went to HR and they handed me a brochure listing all of the work/life programs and policies the company offered, but I’ve never seen anyone else in my group use any of these things. I don’t even know what questions to ask. Maybe I have no choice but to leave. And why doesn’t the committee chair of my volunteer project get the hint when I say wouldn’t it be nice if we read to the kids once a month instead of twice? But is that what really I want—to leave my job, only volunteer once a month? I don’t know. All I know is that I don’t want what I have now, that’s for sure.”

Imagine her excitement when she learns that her volunteer organization is sponsoring one of my Work+Life Fit Workshops. Allison arrives late and frazzled. She apologizes profusely and starts to introduce herself, barely getting out, “My name is Allison...” before dissolving into tears. She asks me to continue while she composes herself and listens attentively while tears continue to stream down her face. But soon I begin to notice that instead of feeling empowered
by learning about the Three Steps to a Better Work+Life Fit, she is visibly frustrated. Finally, she confesses, “I thought you were going to give us solutions, not just tell us the steps we have to take.”

Hearing her disappointment, I explained that neither I nor anyone else could solve her very unique, very personal work/life conflict. I could help by giving her an easy-to-use framework to follow. I could make her aware of the things she needed to consider, but she had to do the actual work. She nodded half-heartedly, and I continued with the workshop.

As we were all saying good-bye, Allison approached me. “After hearing about the steps and the creative ways others have resolved their work/life problems, I now see why it is up to me, because I can’t go on like this much longer. That’s for sure. But I’m not sure the answer is to leave my job.” She laughed, “Are you sure you just can’t tell me what to do?”

I grabbed her hand and responded smiling, “No, because we both know it wouldn’t work. What I can tell you is that, with some effort, you can influence your work/life reality, and stop those tears. You are not at the whim of all of your current work and personal realities; you are not powerless to change them.” And as she walked out the door, Allison seemed to be standing a bit taller and walking a bit more peacefully. I had hope, and I think she did too.

**CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING**

How do you feel about taking the initiative to create a better work+life fit?

- Does the concept make you feel overwhelmed or empowered? Why?
- Review the reasons why your manager, HR department, or prospective employer isn’t able to solve your work/life conflict for you.
- Review the ways HR can support your efforts to find a better work+life fit. Spend some time researching what work/life supports your current or prospective employer offers that can help you in your efforts.
Examine your loyalty to your employer. Is it blindly unconditional or appropriately conditional? Do you recognize that you have a right to find a better work+life fit?

Assuming that your personal life and relationships are the only constant in this ever-changing globalized, high-tech work world, do you feel that you are making the appropriate investment of time and energy into these areas? If not, how would you like it to be different?