

WHY WE CAN'T BALANCE
LIFE AND WORK—
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT



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We live in a world where our work requires more and more of our time and energy. Technology seems to make matters worse. With lap top computers, cell phones, and blackberries, we take our work with us in the car, to our home, and on vacation. We say our life outside the workplace is very important to us – probably more important than our work. When I ask married workers, “If you had to choose between your job or your family, which would you choose?”, the vast majority of people respond that they’d choose their family. Unfortunately, our actions rarely support this response. Typically, our actions imply that we put work as a higher priority than our homes. And, our actions do speak louder than our words. As a result of this dissonance between what we believe and what we do, we get frustrated, are disappointed in ourselves, and get angry at our human condition.

Stephen Covey says that we tend to put the urgent in front of the important. If our home lives are important and our work is urgent, we tend to put work in front of our home lives. We let what we perceive to be urgent at the moment dominate what we know to be important. Here’s a story that I believe captures this dilemma. My experience in the workplace is that if a person is faced with a choice between Johnny’s soccer game on Thursday afternoon (a home need) and a report due to the boss on Thursday afternoon (a work need), most people perceive the report due to the boss as more urgent. However, when considering all of life, these same people tend to say that being involved in their child’s life is important. But, these people say to themselves, “Well, Johnny has another soccer game next week; I’ll go to that one.” Of course, there’s another requirement at work next week as well; and that work requirement dominates. The report due to the boss dominates and we choose to spend the time and effort on the report due to the boss, thereby initiating or reinforcing a cycle of behavior that deepens our dilemma. The long and the short of it is that work wins and home loses.

Does this story ring a bell for you? Maybe you don’t have a Johnny at home with soccer games. Perhaps, you forfeit your regular workouts at the gym because of pressing deadlines at work, thereby affecting your well being. Or, you put off visiting an aging or ill parent because you can’t find the time in your busy schedule. You get the point. Work wins and life loses because the time

resource is limited. (We can't make more time. We can only do better with the time we have.)

Systems theory demonstrates both the reason for this dilemma of the balance between life and work and how to resolve the dilemma. The bottom line is that the balance between life and work is up to you. As the comic strip "Pogo" said, "We've met the enemy and he is us!"

The following summary lays out in logical terms why we do what we do and how to resolve our dilemma. However, the summary also dramatically abbreviates the principles influencing our behavior that results in our inability to find balance in our lives. Following the brief summary, I present a much-more-detailed systems analysis, one that I believe substantiates the conclusions in the summary about why we can't balance life and work and also what we can do to remedy the situation. If you're interested in learning more about the complexity of the issue from a systems perspective, the in-depth analysis provides a detailed logical presentation of how and why most of us fall into the dilemma of not being able to balance life and work.

A BRIEF SUMMARY

When we grapple with trying to balance life and work, we find we're stuck—typically stuck in repeated behavior of putting work in front of life. One example is the soccer story. Our total life that includes work, home, community, and more is a complex system of rules, relationships, and behavior. The structure of our lives; that is, the relationships among the elements that make up our lives and compete for our attention, is central to our behavior (for example, choosing work needs over home needs). In the dilemma of balancing home and work, we're stuck in the structure of the system of our total life; and we keep behaving in ways that seem counter to what we think is important. There's bad news and good news. The bad news is that we're stuck and if we always do what we always did, we'll get what we always got. The good news is that there is a way out of being stuck. The other bad news is that this way out takes courage and effort. The other good news is that the choice is ours.