
An Action Plan for Work-Family Balance



By Anat Amit-Eyal , Executive Leadership Coach (INSEAD EMC '15)

Finding the right balance for your personal and professional life requires conscious planning, ample reflection and proper communication.

Eric, a forty-something married father of three, runs a successful start-up. Given his demanding career, he and his wife decided she would be a stay-at-home mum. Eric believed the attention he devoted to his family was adequate and that he had fully harmonised his work as CEO and life as a family man.

On a recent family trip, Eric continued working as much as he could, as he always did. While taking a conference call, he dropped his phone and, without hesitation, leapt to catch it at the risk of hurting himself. Seeing this, his 13-year-old son blurted out, “I don’t know if you would have jumped after me like that.” Only then did Eric realise that his son didn't think he prioritised their family. Eric had been oblivious that his family felt neglected; he had been unaware or was in denial.

Eric would hardly be the first high-flying executive in this predicament. A study I conducted on work-life integration among top executives for my [INSEAD Executive Master in Change \(EMC\)](#) showed that many CEOs and business leaders [prioritised work over family](#). However, they were unaware of it because they had, in effect, made the choice by not choosing.

Defaulting to work

During my interviews with the executives, some of them initially claimed that they prioritised their family, but conceded as the conversation progressed that work was paramount. Said one shipping executive: “Ninety percent of the time, if you run into me, you'll find that I am working.” A vice-president at a consumer goods company said she always left work for home by 8.30pm, but didn't “see much of the kids”. Others admitted to behaving differently at work than when they were home. “Someone once told me, if you behave at work like you are at home, you'll be fired,” one remarked. Another said he felt more respected at work: “We had guests over. Everyone was speaking. I was trying to say something, but no one paid attention. At work, everyone is silent when I speak.”

They prioritised work in practice, but in many cases, this choice had not been made consciously. How could that be?

Making conscious, informed choices towards work-life harmony begins with recognising the tension between your identities as an executive, spouse or parent. But this may not be easy. If you perceive yourself as a devoted father, mother or child, it can be hard to admit that you prioritise work or that work is central to your self-image. If you think that executives should be sure of themselves, it can be disconcerting to admit to an inner conflict. To avoid such cognitive dissonance, you may turn to denial to avoid guilt, shame, embarrassment or anger. In effect, you lock up your inner conflict.

Taking back control

Let's face it: Executives with hectic careers can't have it all. In a hyper-connected world, it is too easy to default to work and alienate your family as a result. Denial may turn into oblivion – until your family's distress becomes overwhelming. But you can regain control of your life. The key is to be as deliberate about devising a work-life harmony strategy, based on conscious choices, as you would in business.

Here is how:

1. Create a space for thinking and feeling

Start by **identifying your priorities in life**. First, ask yourself: “Who do I want to be?” Visualise your ideal self. Ponder what you need to prioritise in order to become the person you want to be. Next, be curious and observe what you do. Curiosity engenders awareness, and awareness registers facts. What is your week like? How do you spend your time? When you engage in an activity, are you fully present or does your mind wander? Ask your family what they think and how they feel about what you do, and what they need from you.

Explore any conflict you experience and how you feel about it. Ask yourself: “What’s going on inside me?” Your emotions may be a signal that something important is at stake. They will help you see the situation as it is and guide you to better choices. I recommend that you seek support from a coach, a friend or any trusted adviser for this process.

2. Identify realistic options and set an action plan

Create an action plan aligned with your priorities. Be honest and realistic about what you can change. The plan should initially cover two months and begin with two manageable, specific changes. For example, “take the kids to the playground from 5pm to 7pm; no phones”.

As you formulate the plan, consider what the next two months hold in store at work. Are you entering a peak period of tight deadlines and frenzied activity, or will you be able to work at a more moderate pace? Will you be travelling? Your work-life agenda should reflect your upcoming deliverables and work commitments.

Pick a specific time each week to list all your activities and review your plan for the coming week. Remind yourself that you participate in activities because you choose to, not because you have to. Be clear about why you choose each activity and whether it gels with your priorities. Acknowledge that every “yes” is a “no” to something else. Show your plan to your family and get their feedback.

3. Act, communicate and ask for feedback

Act on your new plan. At your weekly review, reflect on what is working for you and what isn't, and how you feel about it. Based on your family's feedback, decide what you want to keep and what you want to change. The more you reflect and assess your feelings, the more you will connect with yourself and what matters to you. The more you communicate with your family, the more you will feel connected to them.

Bury your head in the sand no more. The reward for defining your priorities, setting a plan, as well as communicating and monitoring it will be a healthier relationship with your family and greater inner peace.

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