

## Career Compass No. 29: Forget Work-Life Balance...Re-Energize at Work and at Home!

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest says, "If you feel you don't have time to read this article, you need to read this article."

*I am a Division Manager in a County Environmental Services Department. I love my work but I'm working too hard. I'm often fatigued (as are many on my team). I feel overwhelmed with urgent demands. I am distracted and have little time to think, plan or "connect the dots." I have tried to better prioritize and then delegate some of the less important work but I still feel that work is all-consuming.*

*Worst of all, I do not have much time for my wife and young children. I often stay late at work and when I do get home I'm responding to emails. I am exhausted at work and at home. How do I achieve work-life balance? Help!*



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Those of us devoted to public service and local government work often struggle with this challenge of work-life balance. Being consumed by work is an epidemic in our culture. Notice that in most cultures people would talk about **life-work** balance but not in America. We focus on balancing life with work.

We cannot run on empty. In a knowledge economy, we need positive emotion and energy to do our best thinking and work. As [Tony Schwartz recently pointed out in an hbr.org blog piece](#), if we are already depleted, putting in one more hour of incremental work produces less value and further depletes us.

### “Got Purpose”

The good news is that we are very lucky—we find great meaning in our public service. Many people do not have purposeful work. In contrast, our local government work is imbued with meaning and purpose. We want to make a difference; build community; and save the planet. As Daniel Pink has said in his book *Drive*, meaning is the great motivator. In fact, most local government managers often say that the psychic benefits of our work outweigh the psychic costs.

## Negative Impacts of Work on Our Personal Lives

While recognizing the positive results generated by our service, our work can negatively impact our personal lives. When I recently led a workshop on this topic of “Work-Life Balance,” participants identified the following negative impacts on their personal lives:

- Anxiety and distress
- An unhealthy life
- Less time for family; missed family events
- “I just have a little time for family and friends, nothing else.”
- “No time for me”
- “What personal life?”

## Premises

To work on this issue of re-energizing and renewing ourselves, we should start with certain premises.

**First**, we often get “lopsided,” especially at mid-life, with too much emphasis on work and career. It is too easy to ignore other important aspects of our lives. As writer and physician Orison Swett Marden has said, “Work, love and play are the great balance wheels of man’s being.”

**Second**, re-engaging in family, creative or leisure pursuits can enhance energy and productivity at work. In other words, there is a strong business case for having a robust non-work life.

**Third**, there is no magic bullet. Everyone needs to mix and match strategies that work for them.

**Fourth**, we can learn from each other as we all try to recalibrate.

**Finally**, reflection is a first step in the journey to renew ourselves.

## “Forget Balance”

As Jon Gordon stated in his April 2012 *PM* article “[Appreciate the Moment](#),” work-life balance is difficult if not impossible to achieve. There will be days when work demands all your energies and other times when family requires more of your attention. Therefore, it is better to focus on energy and being in the moment at home as well as work. Betsy Jacobson, former Vice-President of J.P. Morgan Investment Management, once emphasized: “Balance is not better time management, but better boundary management. Balance means making choices and enjoying those choices.”

## Frank’s Top Ten Strategies

Again, there is no one ideal strategy. People need to combine different approaches to see what works for them. Here are my top ten strategies to consider and try out:

### 1. REFLECT ON WHAT IS MISSING (OR NOT WORKING) AND SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH OTHERS

Before doing anything, you need to reflect on what is missing in your life or what is not working to your satisfaction. Then you can do something about the problem. Reflection must precede and inform action.

After spending some time reflecting, share your thoughts with others. There are two reasons to connect with others and share your hopes and concerns. First, saying out loud what is troubling you makes it more real and urgent to act upon. Second, sharing your thoughts with others encourages their support.

When we are experiencing distress, it is easy to isolate ourselves. Therefore, we need to schedule time to reconnect with friends and colleagues. When I felt overwhelmed as a City Manager, I made sure to schedule coffee get-togethers with trusted colleagues to express what I was feeling and get feedback. Social support is critical to resilience and personal change (see [Career Compass No. 9: Bouncing Back From Defeat](#)).

## **2. RECONNECT WITH CREATIVE, LEISURE OR SPIRITUAL PURSUIT**

Since it is easy to become lop-sided at mid-life, you should reconnect with a meaningful creative, leisure or spiritual pursuit that once was engaging or brought pleasure. It can be gardening, photography, tennis, painting, dancing or guitar or attending church or synagogue.

Since they refresh, these non-work experiences also make you more productive at work.

## **3. SHAKE THINGS UP!**

To get out of a rut, it is a good idea to engage in a completely different experience which will not only reinvigorate yourself but provide fresh perspectives. For instance, try. . .

- Learning a new language
- Taking a cooking class
- Volunteering with Habitat for Humanity to build homes in Guatemala
- Going to a family camp in the mountains
- Read a magazine you'd normally not consider (say, *Irish Weddings*)

## **4. PROMOTE PLAYFULNESS AT WORK**

Within the past few years, many of our work places have become quite dreary. People cannot be creative in an environment of deadly seriousness. Therefore, for yourself and your team, I suggest organizing a crazy hat or crazy tie day or a scavenger hunt at lunch time. This kind of “serious fun” not only relaxes people but promotes a lightness and openness to creative ideas and more resilience.

## **5. USE RITUALS AND SANCTUARIES**

Rituals and sanctuaries can help renew people. A ritual is a prescribed order of activities or a habitual practice. My ritual is a daily walk downtown to go get a newspaper and do errands. My walk clears my head and I use the time to think and plan.

A sanctuary is a sacred place or a refuge. I often go to a specific cafe to retreat from all my urgent matters and to simply contemplate. My colleague goes into her backyard every Sunday afternoon, sits in the patio, and plans for the week ahead.

## **6. CREATE A DIGITAL-FREE ZONE**

We are now electronically connected to work 24/7, there is no normal work schedule, and we can work all the time everywhere. To carve out time to have a non-work life and appreciate the moment with family or friends or in creative or leisure pursuits, we need to create a digital-free zone or

times of the day. Some people leave work and turn off all digital gadgets before entering their homes. This allows them to enjoy family life at dinner time and after dinner even if they do some work after the kids go to bed. Others ensure that their family room is a digital-free zone where they will not check for messages or respond to emails or texts.

## **7. FIND A “PASSION PROJECT”**

Oftentimes we get consumed with mundane operational, program or administrative matters which suck the energy out of us. Therefore, you may wish to identify and commit to a “passion project.” Everyone is different and so are their passion projects. For me, I got passionately engaged in affordable housing projects and leadership development initiatives. These kinds of passion projects pose new challenges, learning and the opportunity to further contribute and create meaning. Of course, to free up and protect time and energy for a passion project amidst other duties requires that you hand off some other duties or trade assignments or stop doing stuff.

## **8. TAKE CARE OF ONESELF**

To minimize fatigue and enhance our energy and renew ourselves, we must of course take care of ourselves, ensuring adequate sleep, physical exercise, and proper diet, as well as limiting alcohol and other self-medication.

## **9. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS**

It is critical that we “train” others so they do not unreasonably impose on our non-work selves. For example, if your manager calls you at home about a non-emergency item, you can say that you’d be happy to respond first thing in the morning. This is a subtle message to your manager not to contact you at home unless it is an emergency. If you often work after regular work hours, it is reasonable to inform people that you will be leaving two hours early every Thursday to see your daughter play soccer.

As a manager or as a team member, remember that you serve as a role model. If you are often responding to emails at midnight, you are sending a powerful message that you think this should be the norm. If you record family birthdays or trips or outside activities on your calendar for your work-mates to see, you demonstrate that your personal life is as important as your work life.

## **10. HELP OTHER EMPLOYEES GROW AND DEVELOP**

There is much research to suggest that helping other employees grow and develop is a meaningful and renewing activity. Erik Erikson, the developmental psychologist, has indicated that a key developmental task at mid-life is “generativity”- in other words, preparing and supporting the next generation. According to Erikson, if those of us at mid-life do not sufficiently address this developmental task of generativity, we cannot successfully move on to our next life phase. Other research indicates that those who do support the next generation are three times as satisfied as those who do not. Thus, coaching, mentoring and teaching are very fulfilling and energizing.

## **Help Create an Organizational Culture of Renewal**

Regardless of our formal position or authority, everybody can help build a culture of renewal. Here are some ideas:

- Help everyone focus on learning by scheduling a debriefing after every Governing Board or community meeting or upon project completion in order to identify lessons learned for future practice;

- Make the case for flexible work scheduling based on the nature of the work facing your team and the demands of work and family;
- Suggest or help institute a pilot telework program for your team;
- Conduct a “walking meeting” with a colleague (instead of meeting in a conference room);
- Model healthy behaviors;
- Promote resources offered by your organization’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help everyone deal with stressful situations (e.g., child care issues, teen parenting concerns, the difficulty of caring for older relatives);
- Explore with team members how people can volunteer with outside groups whose missions may replenish them (and you take the lead and model the power of volunteering);
- Schedule periodic check-ins with your team to discuss how everyone can support each other in managing work and non-work demands and what support you as a manager can provide;
- Bring to a staff meeting some treats (such as bagels and coffee) to celebrate a team accomplishment!

### A Personal Challenge—“One Thing To Try”

If you find yourself depleted, you need to do something about it. So here is a challenge. Starting tomorrow, what is one thing you can try out to enhance the fullness of your life?



*Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).