



Harmonizing life's domains

How trade-off thinking limits leaders' potential

by Stewart D. Friedman

By conducting “intelligent and inclusive experiments” leaders at all levels learn how to replace work/life conflict with work/life harmony, and so infuse their work with strengths, assets, and energy from every part of their lives.

For nearly three decades, my life's work has been to help people find ways to bring the often warring aspects of life into greater harmony. Toward that end, my research has focused on a fundamental misconception we all have about the “costs” of success. Many people believe that to achieve great things we must make brutal sacrifices; that to succeed in work we must focus single-mindedly, at the expense of self, family, and society. Even those who reject the idea of a zero-sum game fall prey to a kind of binary thinking revealed by the term we use to describe the ideal lifestyle: work/life balance.

My research has shown that there are ways for everyone – from the managers of sales teams, to executives in government agencies, to computer engineers, to HR specialists, to coaches – to achieve professional success without always having to sacrifice the things that matter in their personal lives. Indeed, we've found that the opposite is true: sustainable professional success results from meaningful investments in the rest of life.

Pursue true success

When leaders look in the mirror, few see exactly the person they want to be. The image is distorted

by inner contradictions. The powerful CEO despairs that he cannot do more for an aging parent... The renowned scientist fears she is losing touch with her spirituality...

The idea that “work” competes with “life” ignores the fact that life is actually the intersection and interaction of four domains: work; family; community; and self, which is the private realm of mind, body, and spirit. Of course, no one enjoys complete contentment in all the corners of life, all at the same time. But conflict and stress are not inevitable. Harmony is possible.

It starts with moving past the notion that one must trade off the different parts of life, each against the rest. Instead, you can choose to see work, family, community, and self all working together – much like a jazz quartet. Different pieces come to the fore moment to moment, but over the course of one's life, all blend together to create beautiful music.

Tom Tierney, one of the successful people I've studied who lead lives that are fulfilling, excels at harmonizing life's domains. Even while serving as CEO of Bain & Company, Tierney never went into the office on weekends. He set that time aside for his family. Tierney was there to support fully both of his sons as they worked to develop skills and achieve significant impact in their community. Tierney also takes excellent care of his physical health and dutifully attends to his inner well-being through activities such as journaling on a regular basis. While striving in the business world and serving his various communities

throughout his early adult life, when he reached his mid-forties, Tierney shifted his emphasis and left Bain to form The Bridgespan Group, an organization that provides strategic consulting and leadership development services to philanthropists, foundations, and nonprofit organizations. This move was the eventual fulfillment of an idea he had envisioned early in his adulthood and took years to realize, small steps at a time. Tierney has actively honored all parts of his life, and so enjoys the fruits of true success.

Be real, be whole, be innovative

What separates such individuals from many of their highly talented but less contented contemporaries? Three things.

The first key is to be real; to act with authenticity. You have to know what you stand for, where you've come from, where you're going, and why.

The second key is to be whole: to act with integrity, striving for an inner sense of oneness, as contrasted with the fragmentation inherent to trade-off thinking. "Integrity" stems from the Latin "integer," which means whole or complete. Acting with integrity demands respecting that you are a person who plays a number of important roles and practicing the skills that enable you to do so purposefully.

The third key is to be innovative, to be continually experimenting with how you get things done, challenging the status quo to find new ways of doing things that are better not just for you or your business, but for all the different parts of your life.

Leaders can master these keys to true success by experimenting intelligently and inclusively.



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Experimenting intelligently means realistically foreseeing and managing risk. Experimenting inclusively means clearly communicating how trying something new will tangibly benefit those who might reflexively resist the innovation.

For example, an executive may tell his colleagues and team: "I'd like to try something, just for the next month or so. I'll go offline on Tuesdays from 3 p.m. until the end of the day, because I'm pretty sure if I use that time to take care of some other things that matter to me, you're going to see improvement in my results that you care about. I'm going to be less distracted and more focused, which means I'll be able to deliver more value when I am working. Would you support me trying that for a month, to see how it goes?"

This executive has effectively removed the primary reasons those around him might oppose his initiative. The proposal envisions an outcome desirable to all; defines the experiment with clear, non-threatening boundaries; and shares control – he has invited people to help assess the success of the experiment.

These same characteristics can also help reduce one's inner resistance. The executive will feel less guilty about trying out this idea because he knows the intent is to help others as much as himself. Further, the upside is significant while the downside is small. He has effectively disarmed the voice in his head that says doing something healthy for himself is either too selfish or too risky.

Liberate your leaders

Even intelligent and inclusive experiments may be resisted in organizations with a heavy command and control orientation, but in such settings, leaders can always find ways to personally model the value of being real, whole, and innovative. Further, within their span of control, leaders can encourage others to appropriately experiment with integrating the various parts of their lives. The successes realized by such leaders and their teams can trigger a kind of grassroots culture change, creating a bit of space for more people to honor and draw strength from who they are outside of work.

Experience will demonstrate that harmonizing (rather than trading off) work and the rest of life need not threaten organizational performance or business success. In fact, leaders may soon be able to quantify rising productivity, improved talent retention, and significant reductions in healthcare and operating costs, as they and their



Stewart D. Friedman

Stew Friedman is the Practice Professor of Management at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the founding director of both the Wharton Leadership Program and the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project. His most recent book, *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life* (Harvard Business, 2014), is a *Wall Street Journal* best-seller. He also wrote the internationally best-selling *Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life* (Harvard Business, 2008). Friedman has advised many private- and public-sector organizations, including the U.S. Departments of Labor and State, the UN, and two White House administrations.

people attain increased clarity of mind, enhanced psychological and physical energy, and a growing love for their lives – including the very significant portion spent at work.

With those very outcomes in mind, savvy organizations will get out front, building intelligent and inclusive experimentation into leadership development to help liberate their leaders from trade-off thinking. Such exercises become all the more powerful when thoughtfully surrounded by assessment, feedback, and coaching support, which is the essence of how we learn leadership and cultivate it over time: Try something, surround it with data, and build in accountability and support as you learn through challenging experiences.

Leadership coaching can help developing leaders identify their core values, starting with the crucible episodes – the three or four episodes in a leader's life history that shaped his or her values and beliefs. How did you come to be the person you are, in terms of what you stand for, what you are willing to fight for? Coaching can then propel developing leaders to gaze forward, helping them to expand and integrate their vision: It's fifteen years from now ... What are you doing? What impact are you having at work, at home, in the community? Who have you become? How are you different from who you are today? Encouraging leaders to share this kind of content in an intimate group of peers, where they can hear what other developing leaders are saying, creates even greater insight into what matters most.

No less important, leadership development can encourage leaders to identify their key stakeholders across all parts of their lives, then clarify mutual expectations. Leaders ask their important life partners: What do you expect of me and what do I expect of you? Coaching can help leaders prepare for and process those stakeholder dialogues, which should include conversations with the dozen or so most important people at home and in leaders' communities, not just the most important people at work. Stakeholder dialogues across multiple domains provide valuable experience in thinking systematically to bring varied and complex dimensions into harmony to achieve optimum outcomes. This, of course, is a hallmark of outstanding executives.

Finally, leadership development should challenge rising executives: Go out and do something that's going to have a positive impact on your work, your home, your community, and yourself. (Note: it's not "or" but "and.") Coaching can help developing leaders ensure these experiments are intelligent and inclusive.

As leaders repeatedly experiment in pursuit of what I call "four-way wins," they come to see themselves as scientists in the laboratories of their own lives, consciously and deliberately taking actions they hope and expect will be useful for themselves and the people around them, and learning as much from failure as from success. Over time their knowledge accumulates and they become skilled not only at adapting to change, but at shaping it, while infusing their work with strengths, assets, and energy from every part of their lives.