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## Balancing 'ACTS': Help Employees Understand and Reduce Stress

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*"Imagine life as a game in which you are juggling five balls in the air. You name them—work, family, health, friends and spirit—and you're keeping all of these in the air. You will soon understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. But the other four balls—family, health, friends and spirit—are made of glass. If you drop one of these, they will be irrevocably scuffed, marked, nicked, damaged or even shattered. They will never be the same. You must understand that and strive for balance in your life."*

— Brian Dyson, CEO of Coca Cola Enterprises from 1959 to 1994 (from a university commencement address).

American employees work five more hours a week than they did two decades ago. In addition, American workers commute longer distances, with most women working an extra six hours in roles as mothers, wives or caretakers. The increase in work hours usually means less time spent with family and friends or pursuing activities that one enjoys.

With increasingly competitive work environments and greater connectivity through computers and wireless devices, workers often seem tethered to work even when at home. Technology has been championed as a way to reduce the number of work hours and increase home and leisure activities, yet for most people the opposite has happened. While some people feel lost without a laptop or cell phone for easy access, others are looking for a way to integrate the demands of a high-powered career with a fulfilling family life.

Research by the [Center for Work-Life Policy](#) confirms that many Americans are experiencing burnout and increased stress. While pressures can be self-inflicted, many workers say they have little time for themselves.

Women, in particular, report increasingly conflicting work and family roles. With women serving as the primary family caretakers, they experience additional conflict in choosing between what is best for their families and what is best for their careers. When men and women choose to take time off (off-ramp) to care for children or elderly parents, they are often put at a disadvantage (lower positions and less pay) when choosing to return to work (on-ramp).

Men and women who fail to cope well with stress often experience high rates of illness, absenteeism, frustration, irritability, exhaustion and difficulty concentrating. Some studies suggest that the additional pressures lead to overeating, smoking, greater alcohol consumption and/or resignations.

Though men and women often romanticize the perfect work/life balance, what is balanced for one person is completely different for another. According to a *McKinsey Quarterly* article, "[Centered Leadership: How Talented Women Thrive](#)," balance is determined by many factors, including energy level, personal goals, activities that stimulate and resources available at a given time.



Moreover, there is a growing trend for workers to seek and ask questions about work/life balance. According to the Association of Executive Search Consultants, 85 percent of recruiters reported that job candidates were rejecting job offers without enough work/life balance. And 90 percent of recruiters said that work/life balance considerations are more important than they were five years earlier, reported *Forbes* (in "**Balance: The New Workplace Perk**").

### **'ACTS': A Stress-Reduction Strategy**

Managers can help their team members to assess their stress levels and reduce the pressure by encouraging them to apply "ACTS," which stands for:

- A** – Ask three key questions.
- C** – Commit to establishing boundaries.
- T** – Take steps to achieve personal balance.
- S** – Stay the course.

#### **Step One: Ask Three Key Questions**

In determining what work/life balance looks like, the first suggestion is for employees to ask:

- "What matters most to me or what gives me the most satisfaction at work and home?" Employees should continue asking the question until they have five top priorities.
- "Of these activities, situations and conditions, which ones replenish my energy?" This helps to determine what should be placed atop the employees' priorities lists.
- How can I eliminate and/or reduce doing things that are not on my list?" This question leads into the next ACTS step.

#### **Step Two: Commit to Establishing Boundaries**

Once they've identified their top five priorities and what gets in the way, employees should look for what engages them most and gives them a sense of satisfaction. They can then make a personal commitment to put the right things first. They might want to schedule and protect private time, ensure time for exercise or team sports, volunteer more regularly or have family dinners at least three times a week.

#### **Step Three: Take Steps to Achieve Personal Balance**

Individuals are the only ones who can make changes needed to achieve balance for themselves. Employees need to be aware of what gives them energy and what takes it away.



Encourage team members to list their energy sappers and energizers. When possible, rather than completing tasks that use up all their energy at once, they should space them out between energizing activities during the day.

If spacing tasks isn't realistic, they should try scheduling an energizer such as talking with a friend, reading a chapter of a book, listening to music or taking a walk during lunch or on a break. Scheduling rewarding activities can offer a needed boost.

#### **Step Four: Stay the Course**

Just like a new year's resolution, it is difficult to sustain plans for achieving greater balance and a new routine without support. When employees establish and commit to protect their personal boundaries, others might not like the change.

It is a good idea for them to discuss what they're trying to do with significant others at home and at work. They might explain that they most enjoy working late because of the quiet time they have to think and write, for example. Better boundary management increases satisfaction.

#### **What Organizations Can Do**

Fortunately, companies have made efforts to help employees balance work and life responsibilities. Many employers understand how important positive work and family-friendly environments are to increasing the satisfaction and retention of good employees. They are exploring creative methods to energize their employees and keep them happy. For example:

- Google offers on-site laundry, gyms, car washes and free ski vacations to its employees.
- Genentech offers a six-week paid sabbatical for every six years of service.
- Game-maker Cranium builds a family-inclusive culture with parties held at every major holiday and free take-home games for employees.

Some companies are taking more unusual steps to remind employees about the importance of both worlds by offering:

- Healthy lifestyle competitions (biggest loser, etc.).
- Integrating work and family activities (bring a daughter to work; family night activities, etc.).
- Parenting classes for expectant fathers.
- Corporate blogs to publicize ways some employees and leaders integrate their personal and professional lives successfully.

Additional suggestions for helping employees to reduce stress, achieve greater satisfaction and take care of themselves include:

- Encourage workers to take lunch breaks away from their desks.
- Offer flexible working arrangements when possible.
- Discourage workaholic behavior.
- Consider compulsory leave and strict maximum hours, and foster an environment that encourages employees not to continue working after hours.
- Honor parental leave policies and guidelines.
- Allow time to handle family scheduling and conversations.



### **Commitment and Flexibility**

Although the details of effective policies vary across organizations, two important factors are critical: mutual commitment and flexibility.

It is important for leaders to understand the policies and to insure that women and men who step out to a reduced or flexible schedule do not lose opportunities for challenging assignments or eventual promotion. Part-time arrangements and employer-supported career development opportunities build loyalty and assist employees with the transition back.

Finally, and most important, successful companies view family and quality-of-life concerns not just as women's issues but as organizational priorities. Considering and managing work/life balance issues effectively attracts and retains a more able and diverse workforce.

### **Summary**

Navigating work/life balance issues is challenging for individuals and leaders. Remember, what is balanced varies from person to person and is determined by many factors, including energy level, personal goals, activities that stimulate and resources available at a given time. ACTS is one method that can be used to help employees understand what matters most, establish clear boundaries and take steps to build a more satisfying life.

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### **Related Articles:**

**Turning Stress into Strength**, *HR Magazine*, January 2010

**Stress Drives Wellness Strategies in Many Countries**, *HR News*, September 2010

**Survey: Work/Life Balance Off-Kilter in U.S.**, *HR News*, September 2010