

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

The Balance Baker's Dozen: Tips for Becoming and Staying Balanced

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“When things settle down, I will _____.” How many times have you said this? But things never settle down. The pace of learning required just to stay even with trends is faster than ever. The pace required to get ahead is often daunting.

Does this suggest that leadership is becoming more difficult? Unquestionably. That challenges are more frequent and more complex? Most certainly. That emerging opportunities demand instant responses? Without a doubt. That organizations and leaders face greater scrutiny from a wider range of stakeholders? Absolutely.

The good news is that complexity and speed also create countless opportunities for growth and fulfillment. Possibilities for innovation abound. Ask yourself, “How can I stop racing long enough to take advantage of opportunities? How can I find fulfillment rather than suffer from burnout?”

Creating a balanced life is the solution.

“Balance” means being energized physically, mentally, spiritually or in other personally meaningful ways. It requires developing and sustaining a realistic, positive perspective. Balance also requires thinking strategically about what energizes you and what

saps your energy – and then developing ways to manage those forces.

Balance is a fundamental leadership strategy. It is not an analysis you apply after updating your to-do list or an attempt to carve more personal time out of your busy schedule. Instead, balance is an active process that affects every aspect of your life.

People often mistakenly view balance as a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to grow. Treating balance as a strategic tool creates opportunities; treating it as a tactical problem adds to an already overloaded to-do list.

“To reach a port, we must
sail – sail, not tie at
anchor – sail, not drift.”
~ Franklin Roosevelt

Get and Stay Balanced

How can you become and stay balanced? Try the following “baker’s dozen” tips:

1. Identify a Clear Purpose. It is difficult to stay balanced without a

defined purpose – a gyroscope – that keeps you centered and provides a benchmark against which to measure opportunities, challenges and progress. A purpose should capture your deepest motivations and loftiest aspirations. See Clayton Christensen’s article, “How Will You Measure Your Life?” (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2010) for an intriguing approach to identifying your purpose.

2. Don’t Get Stuck in the Past. Was the past easier, more prosperous and more successful? Maybe, maybe not. But the world has changed since yesterday and will change again tomorrow. Yesterday’s thinking will not help you design tomorrow’s innovation.

Succeeding today requires replacing a “heads-down” attempt to re-create the past with an external, forward orientation. Get outside your organization, your usual pursuits and your typical information sources to see what the future might offer and how you can help shape it.

3. Force yourself to take breaks – a short walk, an hour at a coffee house, an evening at the movies or a vacation.

Learn to Shift Gears. Spending too much time in high gear is a formula for burnout.

Downshifting helps you recharge and recommit to your central purpose.

It also helps you reframe work so you can be sure you are doing the right work the right way – which includes making time for things that energize you.

4. Think, Then Do. It is all too easy to mistake activity for productivity. Shifting gears regularly will help you gain greater perspective and create space to make thoughtful choices about how to address challenges and opportunities.

Thinking before acting also helps you avoid traps that keep you busy without generating progress. For example, checking email and doing errands can be activity traps unless you limit how much time you will spend and clearly define your objectives.

5. Reprioritize Often. Rapid change requires a rapid response, so decide what is most important to advance every day. The “Rule of Threes” may be helpful: Identify your top three priorities for the next year, quarter, month, week and day. Be sure to include non-work items.

Every cycle (that is, every day, week, month, quarter and year), check your priorities and adjust your activities accordingly. This keeps you focused on what is imperative and leaves unimportant items where they belong – at the bottom of the list.

6. Take the Next Steps. Break personal and professional projects into manageable pieces that are easier to build upon.

7. Make Progress. Many leaders feel pressured to complete the task at hand before moving on. However, making progress along many fronts is often more important to more stakeholders. “Making progress” means constantly improving people, processes and products. Nothing is ever truly final in our fast-moving environment, so it is often better to measure and manage work towards progress rather than completion.

Do not confuse making progress with achieving perfection. Perfection stifles

risk-taking and innovation. Progress involves testing, trying and being willing to fail while you aim for better balance today than you had yesterday.

8. Delegate, Delegate, Delegate. Sharing responsibility frees your time and resources – and helps others build new skills. In addition, accepting new assignments requires recipients to reprioritize, which helps them focus on the most important activities. Try delegating horizontally as well as to direct reports. Your best partners in making progress may be in different functions or business units. They may even be customers or suppliers.

"The choice and successful pursuit of a profession is but one tool for achieving your purpose. But without a purpose, life can be hollow."

~ Clayton M. Christensen

9. Take Care of Yourself. Make nourishing yourself a priority. Neglecting your physical, emotional, spiritual or intellectual health depletes the energy and perspective you need to live a balanced, satisfying life. Further, if you are not healthy, you will not be able to help your organization, employees, life partner, friends, children or community. There is a good reason the airplane instructions tell you to “Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.”

10. Revisit a Favorite Hobby or Start a New One. Taking care of yourself includes engaging in activities you find enriching. Think about something you

might enjoy, then try it. Hobbies also can offer unexpected benefits. Do you like reading history? You may learn about leadership strategies. Enjoy cooking with friends? You may gain insights into teamwork.

11. Challenge Assumptions. Thinking differently can be refreshing and eye-opening. When your first instinct is to ask “why?,” try asking “why not?” When you would typically ask “why not?,” ask “why?” and see what changes.

12. Network and Engage. Brainstorming with new people fuels creativity and generates ideas. It is also fun. Break out of your comfortable rut: Talk to different people about different topics. See what the competition is doing. Find out about activities that excite your friends. Read a book you would not usually pick up. Go see how the rest of the world lives.

13. Think Big. Micromanaging balance is as frustrating and futile as micromanaging anything else. Trying to keep your work, your team, your family and every other part of your life balanced on a daily basis likely will be pointless for you and frustrating for your stakeholders, colleagues, family and friends.

Viewing balance as a valuable strategic leadership tool requires accepting that things will never settle down. It requires recognizing that today’s pace creates as many opportunities as it does difficulties.

Once you accept this, you can think productively about your purpose, clarify what energizes you, identify what depletes you and find greater professional and personal meaning. You will likely find that defining what success means to you and creating a life to achieve it on your terms is more important – and vastly more fulfilling – than constantly chasing a vague or meaningless success standard defined by other people’s expectations. [HK](#)

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