

# BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

## Personal chaos tipping the scales in balancing work, life

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People call me a control freak. They say that I'm anal. I just like to call myself well organized. I'm a plan-ahead kind of guy.

My life has an order to it. My bills are paid on time. I prepare the morning's coffee before going to bed. And submissions to my clients are never late. To use a modern phrase, you could say that I'm a master of time management.

So, imagine my neurosis when things go awry. When order turns to disorder, I'm a wreck.

Last week was pure craziness: First, our home remodeling morphed from a simple \$5,000 cosmetic repair into a \$30,000 structural makeover. There's a coarse dust coating every surface in the house, including our cats. Second, I was driving my sons home from school and we got rear-ended. Now we have to get the car to the shop, pick up a rental, deal with the insurance company, etc. Fortunately, there were no injuries; only the pain of wasted time. Third, after a major windstorm, I noticed a giant broken limb from our oak tree hovering only inches above the phone and electric lines. And then there's that leak in our sunroom roof.

In a more serious vein, there's a war. Now add to this turmoil the simple fact that I'm just aiming to get through my week at work. I've got responsibilities to my employer. How the heck am I supposed to deal with my personal chaos when I owe my boss eight hours of concentrated time each day? My time management skills have been stretched beyond their limit.

I'm trying to be positive. I really am. My family is healthy. We've got food and heat. It's always comforting to know that things could be worse, I suppose.

Still, I'm riddled with guilt when I spend an hour of my work day on the phone arguing with the guy at the auto body shop. And while my brain is awash with anxiety, I can't help but wonder when else I'm supposed to be dealing with this personal stuff.

It's no real coincidence that the words "chaos" and "gas" share the same origin: a Greek/Flemish translation mix-up of



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"khaos." That explains the intense rumbling in my stomach.

I don't deal well with this much disruption. As Andy Rooney, of "60 Minutes" fame, once said, "Uncertainty is worse than disappointment." If I had all of life's bad news ahead of time, I could at least plan for it. It's the not knowing that's making me nuts.

Work/life balance is a hot buzz phrase right now. Human resource folks are peddling it at the recruitment door. I've heard it called the "holy grail of the corporate world." Bookstores devote entire shelves to the topic, yet ironically, I just can't find the time to read an entire book about simplifying my life. I can't even find time to make it to the bookstore.

Is balance even achievable? Mark Gor-

kin, America Online's "Psychohumorist" and author of "Practice Safe Stress," told me that he believes that there is no such thing as static balance. Work/life balance is dynamic, Mark suggested. "Like a tight-rope walker, you are forever swaying and moving."

Telecommuting. Flex-time. Job-sharing. Family Leave Act. All nice, but not perfect when dealing with the unexpected, like when you suddenly have to pick up your sick kid from school. How come nobody is lobbying for the Cut-Me-Some-Slack Act (CMSSA)?

I am lucky because I have a job that allows me the flexibility to say, "I have to meet with my contractor this morning. I'll be in the office a bit late." If my child gets sick in the middle of the day and I have to

take off early, it's not a problem.

There's a very informal system of announcements in my office. We simply zap an e-mail to the staff, stating when we'll be in and why we'll be late. The same system works when one of us has to leave early. There is no official rule regarding how far in advance these e-mails are sent. There's just a tacit understanding of courteousness that I should warn my co-workers if I'm not going to be accessible. For the most part, no one abuses this system.

My employer is very accommodating, and my colleagues are understanding because at times they're going through similar predicaments. What goes around comes around. We're homeowners, and parents, and pet owners. Things come up. We have this procedure in place to deal

with out-of-office issues, so I should feel fine. Right? Then why do I still feel so stressed out and guilt-ridden?

Scientists at Rockefeller University have concluded that an acute episode of stress boosts immunity, so we tend not to get sick during times of crisis. Heart rate and blood pressure soar, increasing the flow of blood to the brain. Stress might be good for us. I guess that explains why I'm healthy, but it still doesn't help with the fact that I'm freaking out.

I've heard that under extreme stress, such as when held in captivity, some octopuses will eat their own arms. That's closer to how I'm feeling.

OK, I admit it: I'm a control freak. And I've lost control. I'm not pulling my weight at work because my mind is elsewhere. At least I think I'm not pulling my weight. My office anxiety and my home turmoil have collided at full speed.

Mark Gorkin, who's internationally known as "The Stress Doc," told me that "resilience is the most important factor in balance." If I can bounce back after being knocked down by surprise disasters, then I've found balance. Using therapy-speak, he said that my guilt is based on unrealistic expectations of myself.

The saying goes, what doesn't kill you will make you stronger. I suppose that's good experience for me to learn how to deal with life out of balance, when my routines are shot to hell.

After our house is put back together and our car is repaired, I might notice that the sky did not, in fact, fall down. And with hope, the next time my life is thrown off path I will be better toned to deal with it.

Balancing work and life doesn't really have much to do with a flexible schedule as it does with accepting the fact that day-to-day life isn't perfect. Despite all of the concessions given to me so that I can deal with unexpected chaos in the middle of the week, I'm still feeling overwhelmed. It's in my head.

The Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote, "People are disturbed not by things, but by their perception of things." Or as my wife tells me, "David, get a grip. It's not that big of a deal."

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