



Saying the unsaid

Real and honest reflections on the personal struggles and opportunities of being a leader.

Saying the Unsaid... BALANCE

Work/life balance is important we are told; it is the thing we are meant to aspire to. I'm sure we wouldn't disagree with that. The problem is what does 'balance' even mean? How do we do it?

What is balance?

I usually start with the dictionary when I lose my way with a word. 'Balance' is one of these words. What is balance?

- The first definition in the dictionary is to do with stability: 'an even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady'.
- The second one is more about proportions: 'a situation in which different elements are equal of in the correct proportions'
- The third one is about value: 'offset or compare the value of (one thing) with another'.

That's it. Getting balance is about keeping ourselves stable, working out what matters and making a judgement on the value of something. There are no right answers here, there is weighing up, there are judgement calls and different decisions at different times.

How do we weigh something up so we can stay upright?

Here is how I attempt to do it. You will find your own way but if this is what you struggle with, maybe this will help you out of the weeds.

1) Who is getting my 'yes' and who is getting my 'no'?

When I am weighing up where to put my time and energy when there are competing demands, I ask myself 'who needs to have my yes?'. Sometimes it is right that I say 'yes' to work and 'no' to my friends/family...but sometimes it has to be the other way round. If we say 'yes' to everyone and everything, our 'yes' is meaningless. Place your 'yes' and 'no' as deliberately as you would place a chess piece.



2) Identify what you need to feel balanced.

For me it is reading, having time on my own, going away alone for a night every 6 months (that isn't work related), having unhurried time with close friends, spending time with my family without the presence of phones/alarms/work demands, getting out to get a latte on days when I am hectic at work. I used to feel a bit guilty about needing these things, but I know now that if I get them, I am far better off and so are the people around me. Those moments of alone time renew my energy and help me keep my perspective. I have learned that I need to communicate what it is I need, to myself and to others. I have long since given up the 'guess what I am feeling without me using any words' approach. Staying silent and hoping someone accurately guesses what they could not possibly know is not a reliable strategy!

3) Re-frame what you mean by balanced in the first place.

Randi Zuckerberg in her book 'Pick 3' helpfully suggests that we cannot get balance every single day, it is balance over a longer time we want. She says there are 5 areas we can pick from, and each day we pick just three.

- a. Friends
- b. Exercise/fitness
- c. Work
- d. Sleep/rest
- e. Family

She suggests that we should look at a week/month or half term and see if we have got balance overall in that time. I have absolutely adopted this approach. This last week I have been away for 3 nights to run conferences but, knowing that I was choosing work for these 3 days, I made sure that the last 2 weekends and evenings were entirely centred on my family. Over a two-week period there has been balance. Just not over these last few days where I have chosen work/friends/sleep. When I get home, I will choose family/sleep and friends. I explain this to my children too, so they understand; they get it. It is simply impossible to do all 5 of those things each day so I don't try.

4) Put the other leg down!

As a kid I wasn't very good at balancing on one leg. When you wobble and think you are going to topple, you put the other leg down, it is the natural thing to do to get grounded again and find balance. It is the same metaphorically too. When you feel like you are wobbling, get grounded. Stop, breathe, think in ink, talk to yourself in the third person (research shows it works!), do some time travel (think 'will I still be worried about this in 5 years' time?'). It works and it stops you wobbling. It brings balance back.

5) Count the marbles!

If you really struggle to get your balance under control, then find a way to literally offset the value of one thing against another. I knew a couple once who used to agree their working hours and for every hour worked over that time, they added a marble to a jar. Each marble represented the promise of



an hour to be spent together at another time. Life happens, sometimes we need to work over the agreed hours but then we count those hours and make sure we balance it out at another point. We can get balance although probably not every day! We need to be deliberate about finding it.