

FROM CHINA TO CHILE: THE CHALLENGES, TRIGGERS, AND CHOICES ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

THE UNCONSCIOUS CORPORATE CRISIS

In Japan there is a word that translates in English to “death by work.” In India, China, and the United States there are documented cases of people dying at their desks. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reports stress is a factor for more than half of all lost working days and is also the second most frequently reported work-related health problem in the European Union. The American Institute of Stress states that as a direct result of workplace stress, U.S. businesses lose over \$300 billion annually.

When it comes to this topic of work-life balance, the world economy is facing an unconscious crisis, with the collective potential impact in the trillions of dollars attributed to expenses related to work-life balance. Related expenses include short-term disability, long-term disability, healthcare costs, low morale, and presenteeism (when employees show up physically but not mentally and are unable to fully contribute). All of these expenses affect the bottom line of companies and economies of entire countries, in addition to having immeasurable effects on employees’ health and the consequent impact that may have on family systems.

Call it work-life balance, work-life harmony, or work-life integration, the reality is it impacts more than half (some studies say up to 75 percent) of all employees, regardless of gender, job level, or marital and parental status. All trends indicate that the challenges and costs associated with work-life imbalance are rising, not declining. Many Fortune 1000 companies measure it with organizational health or work health indexes or employee polls (or not at all); however it is measured, and whatever each corporate ethos labels it, it is a silent threat to the future of global economic and individual stability.

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

To better understand the predicament, it’s helpful to look at the concept of the work-life balance like an illness. To address the issues surrounding the situation, most companies are focused on fixing the symptoms of the illness opposed to treating the behavior factors that cause the illness. When a company first becomes aware that they are experiencing the impact of imbalance, the first action in most cases is to invest in developing a robust employee benefit program, to address the symptoms. Unfortunately, this does not always work. It can certainly help in some cases, but does not address the systemic causes. In fact, after hearing thousands of employees in more than 30 countries from China to Chile, Russia, France, Germany, Canada, the United States, and beyond express what work-life balance means to them, we found that it’s not about company benefits like flex-time, mobile workspaces, health club memberships, gourmet food, or free coffee. In fact, these benefits are rarely mentioned as things that create better balance in the life of an employee.

In many ways corporate employees around the globe have come to expect these types of benefits from employers, so when talking about work-life balance, the conversation turns toward the symptoms that are causing the most pain: meeting disempowerment, lack of “think time,” unclear digital boundaries, e-mail overload, working a “second day” at home after leaving the office, being perpetually busy, and overall lack of enthusiasm. As mentioned, there is no dispute that balance-focused benefits can help support employees; however, unless the conversation shifts to the systemic causes surrounding the work-life balance issue, these types of benefits will not be enough to retain and attract top talent and create sustainable, positive, and productive work environments.

Work-life balance is a complicated issue; there are valid, rational reasons why companies find themselves navigating this unconscious crisis. In the global media, conversations about work-life balance take a general tone which in many ways is contributing to the already existing gap between leadership/managers and individual contributors. The current state is one where employees feel simultaneously overlooked and entitled, because they have to do more with less given economic realities, paired with the pressures to compete on a global scale. Managers feel fatigued, both from hearing

their employees complain and because they have to motivate teams to produce more effective results with fewer resources. It's a situation that leaves no space for either group to take action to address the causes (or appreciate company lifestyle benefits), because the conversation is stuck on the symptoms that create the most pain.

THE GOOD NEWS

The cure is not about working less or making dramatic and costly changes to how businesses are currently organized and managed, it's about facing the reality of organizational challenges. There is a low-cost, high-impact solution, and it's unique in that the problem and solution are one in the same—the employees. The power to improve work-life balance at any organization lies in how employees accept accountability for their part in the challenges they face and their ability to make conscious choices around their behaviors. When managers and employees have a better understanding of the reality of the situation and a framework to deal with situational triggers, they are better able to make healthy choices in times of greater imbalance.

THE 7 CHALLENGES

1. EMPLOYEES FEEL UNDERAPPRECIATED

This isn't about employees whining. Regardless of job title or rank, people everywhere share the desire to be acknowledged for their efforts in the workplace. When people are working overtime to win a client, close a deal, build products, or innovate, they want know that someone, somewhere, has not only noticed their work but appreciated the actions and effort expended. Multiple research studies on workplace and human behavior in general show that recognition is highly correlated to improved engagement, performance, and motivation. Research also shows that it is not a one-size-fits-all issue. What matters most is that the recognition is specific, meaning that it is linked to a goal, behavior, or outcome and is valuable to the person receiving it. Simply put, employees want to be seen.

2. EMPLOYEES LACK CONTEXT

Even the best managers struggle with providing the right amount of context to their teams to create the link between what they do each day (meetings, strategies, and e-mail) to the larger team and even larger organizational goals. Many times the lack of context is not intentional but rather a symptom of an organization with too many goals and objectives and a management structure in which managers also have individual commitments in addition to leading a team. What can happen in this situation is that managers are unable to establish a level of trust with the team that helps team members understand the connection of work and creates the environment in which the team is "in it together." Providing more context (or asking for more context) allows team members to feel more in control of what they are working on and develop a strong work "community," which, according to studies, helps to reduce workplace stress and create a greater sense of balance within the workplace.

3. SPEED IS VALUED OVER THOUGHT

The current business culture around the globe is to do it faster. Between businesses, it shows up as increasing bandwidth speeds, eliminating downtime, offering quick response times, and service-level agreements going from weeks to days to, in some cases, hours. It appears inside the organization in a race to be the first one to answer e-mail, meetings every minute of the day to move projects forward, and an "ask for forgiveness later" attitude. It also shows up as employees working the "second shift," where they get online after dinner and/or before breakfast to respond to e-mail and move tasks forward, because task completion is the way in which many employee review models are based. New big ideas and strategic thinking are rewarded, as long as this type of work is done quickly or during the "second shift" so it doesn't impede meeting participation or e-mail response times.

4. BUSINESS HAS BECOME MORE ABOUT NUMBERS AND LESS ABOUT PEOPLE

This is not to dispute the solid business practice that teams be designed based on business needs, not people. At the same time, a person is hired to fulfill the business need—the two cannot be completely separated. There

is such a clear and intense focus on automation, volume, ROI, driving COGS down, and squeezing out every ounce of efficiency that the human factor gets overlooked. Many leaders lose sight of the fact that there are actual people with ideas, passion, and emotions behind and driving the numbers. When there is over-focus on role functions and performance metrics, employees feel disempowered and disconnected to the purpose behind the work, a situation that human behavior researchers know can lead to creating an apathetic organization.

5. FEW REALISTIC “BALANCED” ROLE MODELS EXIST

Let’s face it—not many people have figured out how to have “balance/harmony/integration.” In many cases, the leaders who have figured it out are put forth to talk to employees, and the feedback is that the leaders live in a “different world” that many employees cannot relate to. Meaning, they have a stay-at-home spouse and/or the income to afford delegation of household responsibilities such as cleaning, yard work, cooking, and childcare. Yes, a message of empowerment is delivered in that work should end at a certain time and family should be put first; however, many times the nitty-gritty tactics and experience of making hard choices is glossed over. At the same time, many managers talk about balance, yet their actions contradict their words, creating even greater confusion among work teams—especially when managers send e-mails late at night or work through vacations and weekends, which sets an unspoken expectation that the same is required of the team.

6. EMPLOYEES ARE DISCONNECTED FROM THEIR BODIES

In the United States, it is estimated that 8 out of 10 doctors’ visits are stress related and 300 million people take prescription drugs for a mood disorder—costing the US economy \$300 billion each year. In a corporate culture in which employees are being asked to do more with less, where speed is valued over thought, no wonder workers are becoming more and more out of touch with their health and becoming numb to the signals their bodies are sending them. Many employees share that they live in their heads and experience a total disconnect from their bodies simply because they are too busy to deal with going to a doctor’s appointment, taking sick time, or allowing their bodies to simply heal. Stress-related conditions such as high blood pressure, anxiety, digestive issues, and sleep disorders are rampant in the white-collar world. For many people, listening to their body is an inconvenience they cannot afford professionally and, in some cases, financially to address.

7. EMPLOYEES STAY AT WORK TO AVOID “LIFE”

Let’s be honest: sometimes it’s easier to be at the office than it is to be at home. At home, there might be a combination of children with varying emotional, physical, and mental needs depending on their ages, as well as frustrated spouses, a list of chores, and other obligations. For others, home might be an empty space with very few needs or demands at all. These scenarios can both be fueling and draining to a person. At times being at work is easier because demands are clearly defined and plotted on timelines, and there are project plans, commitments, and goals to help dictate what’s next. People know what is expected at work and what is needed to meet those expectations, whereas many feel their personal lives are lacking such goals and plans and are in some cases too drained from work to guide “life.” In many ways work is more predictable and less emotionally taxing than “life,” so it’s easier to simply stay at work physically or remain e-tethered to the office.

FACING THE CHALLENGES

Facing the realities of the situation does not have to be complicated or costly. To truly create impact around work-life balance, awareness on multiple levels is required. Employees need to build awareness around their behavior and actions and to take more accountability to push back on tasks without outcomes, ask for more clarity when context is lacking, and create a life that is meaningful outside of work. Managers need to have better awareness regarding the impact of their actions and words on their teams and business partners. This includes providing context, being clear on their definition of balance, setting clear expectations, and recognizing good work.

Part of this awareness comes from recognizing that there are specific universal triggers for imbalance that are the same from country to country, team to team. They differ slightly in the words used to describe the impact and scenarios in which they manifest, but the consequences to the individual and organization is the same. The effects of these triggers

that come up the most are things like e-mail overload, being perpetually busy, and an overall lack of enthusiasm due to an overwhelming amount of commitments and responsibilities and the ever-present need to do more, faster and better.

Creating a shift in organizational and team behavior does not require huge structural changes or even a large budget, just a willingness on the part of leadership/managers and individual contributors to see how the seven universal triggers are showing up within their organization and life and use a framework to make conscious choices to make adjustments as necessary.

THE 7 TRIGGERS

1. STRUGGLE FOR FLEXIBILITY

The number one thing employees want is flexibility. They want the work to be about outcomes and not hours logged or time spent sitting in an assigned workspace. Employees have a deep desire for freedom and trust from management to do the work needed to get the job done. That might happen in the office, at home, on a train, or even during a vacation, which isn't always a negative if circumstances permit and proper boundaries have been established. Regardless, it's about having the choice and support from management to do it in a way that works for the individual in a predictable, consistent way. And no, this does not mean everyone wants to "work from home"; in fact, quite the opposite—they want to feel more in control of the time they do have at work and know that, if needed, they can have the choice to get things done elsewhere if a situation calls for it.

2. MEETING DISEMPOWERMENT

Every way you look at it, there is a huge pain point around meetings. There are too many of them to start with, combined with lack of agendas, outcomes, and even awareness on the amount of time actually needed to discuss an issue. It's very common that people go to meetings when they don't know why they are going, because they are fearful of pushing back, because of who might be in the meeting, or because they fear being perceived as "not a team player." Another common trend is invite others to meetings as a defensive strategy, because it's easier to communicate in a group setting or have the fallback to say "You were invited to the meeting where this was discussed." Working to ensure and communicate standards of meeting etiquette can go a long way toward driving efficiency and creating a more balanced working environment.

3. UNCLEAR DIGITAL BOUNDARIES

Within corporate cultures, it's the same from country to country: people struggle with their relationship with their mobile devices including phones, laptops, and tablets. Although these are all amazing technological devices, employees are often unclear on acceptable digital boundaries and how to communicate them to others when it comes to how often to check e-mail on a phone and to work when not at the office. More than that, employees struggle with which method of communication is best to use and when. Getting clear as a team around the acceptable uses of tools like Outlook, Lync, Skype, texting, and voice mail is essential to helping teams better support each other in creating balance. Questions to consider are: Is Lync the best tool for the conversation? What's an acceptable response time for e-mails? Is it okay to text work colleagues? What can I do when people are on their phones or laptops in meetings and I feel that they are not engaged? When clear expectations and digital boundaries are set (and followed) by managers around what behaviors are acceptable, employees instantly feel more empowered to support the boundaries and customize technology to fit their needs.

4. LACK OF THINK TIME

As already mentioned, the sheer volume of meetings is a symptom of a team with the work-life balance disease. Some employees can go a solid week without having any strategic "think time" to complete tasks assigned in a meeting or provide thoughtful feedback on issues at hand. Most employees do their "think time" on what has been called "the second shift," after they return home for the day or to the office once it empties out for the night. Think time is deprioritized and for some considered a nice-to-have, not a vital part of being successful at work. It has been said on many occasions one of the best values a consultant can bring to a team is the fact that they have time to think critically about problems and solutions. Oddly, many employees do not consider this

think time “work” because the workday has become so closely linked to answering e-mail and attending meetings.

5. FEAR OF PUSHING BACK

Most employees do not feel like they have a choice to say no to additional work, even if it is an out-of-scope request, not part of present commitments, and especially if it is a management “fire drill.” There exists a real fear of being perceived as an underperformer or not a team player when saying no. This is especially the case when employees have managers as well as business partners and are getting work assignments (and reviews) from both groups. The result is that employees continue to say yes at the risk of affecting their other work. Many times managers are not aware of all the takes and out-of-scope requests the team might be absorbing, as employees are fearful to share because they don’t want to be labeled a complainer or because they truly think they can complete it all with no negative impact to outcomes or quality. The inability to say no and to clearly and continually be able to communicate commitments and priority of commitments can lead to burnout and negative impact to morale.

6. COMPLAINING WITHOUT ACTION

Many employees talk often about what is not going well, but not many people and teams talk about the issue AND a solution to solve it. This leads to an environment in which people and/or teams feel stuck in a loop of endlessly reacting, opposed to proactive problem solving and changing the outcome. The funny thing about complaining is, many people are not clear on what it is they are actually complaining about, and may also confuse complaining with criticizing. (A complaint is an expression of a feeling of displeasure; a criticism is rooted in judgment of the actions, values, or work of others.) Most complaints can be resolved, whereas most criticisms go unresolved. More than that, many times complaints about what is not working are not making it to the persons who can create change. Most toxic of all is when a person or a team has a complaint and no one is voicing it, creating a disempowering environment in which there is no hope for a different outcome.

7. FALSE EXPECTATIONS

Many employees are caught in their own and others’ hedging—which is when people agree to do something that all parties know will not get done. People commit to projects or to deliver to timelines when they have no intention (or in some cases ability) to do so. This spins unproductive cycles and robs the team/people of time and the ability to create and manage to real timelines and set realistic expectations. (Most times this is done out of fear of being perceived as an underperformer or lacking the empowerment to push back on out-of-scope requests.) Depending on the degree, this can degrade the level of trust with business partners and colleagues, as your word is linked to integrity; when people are constantly going back and adjusting their word, integrity can come into question.

CONSCIOUS AWARENESS

When both managers and individual contributors can clearly see the challenges and triggers related to work-life balance, solving the issue is rather simple. (Simple does not always mean easy.) In this case it requires effort from every person at every level in the organization, and that first requires starting an authentic conversation on the topic within the team to create the opportunity and support to make small behavior shifts. When imbalance is present, regardless of the severity, there are specific actions that can be taken to begin to create a more evenly balanced work environment.

THE 7 CHOICES

1. SHOW RESPECT

Most employees shared that they do not feel acknowledged. Managers don’t have to create cumbersome award programs or buy expensive employee gifts to demonstrate respect. Managers and peers showing respect and acknowledgement for each other is about noticing contributions, calling attention to wins or an extra effort, with genuine and simple expression such as an e-mail or handwritten note (even on a Post-it). It can also mean asking about and honoring any work-related boundaries expressed by team members.

2. BE YOUR WORD

Say what you mean and mean what you say. As a manager, providing context to your team members is imperative to their success as a group and as individuals. For individual contributions, communicating with accuracy and setting realistic expectations can dramatically reduce stress. Sending consistent weekly update e-mails, sharing project summaries, or taking a few minutes in each team meeting to discuss current issues can go a long way to helping teams feel a stronger connection to the larger business goals. Business context creates stability and predictability, and when employees have awareness around the strengths and weakness in the business, it can make the ups and downs easier for employees to manage and sometimes even proactively plan for and accept.

3. STOP AND THINK

One of the biggest impacts of this unconscious crisis is rapid reactivity. After all, how a person thinks and solves problems is an integral part of most interview processes. Working for speed can sometimes be contradictory to a person's strongest skill set, and the very reason they were hired into the team. Contrary to current work trends, stopping and thinking before moving right to action and reaction can save time and money in the long run. Not every decision has to be, nor should be, made at warp speed; working to resist the urge to battle the clock can have immeasurable benefits to workplace stability.

4. SHOW UP AS YOU

Living a balanced life is full of hard choices. Like it or not, managers are a balance role model for your team. It doesn't mean all managers have to make choices that do not work for them to model what they think the ideal balance behavior should be; rather, it means that by making choices that are authentic for themselves about how, when, and where they work and by communicating context and expectations to their team, they can empower their teams to follow their lead.

5. BE HUMAN

Stress can come from work or from life, but to the brain and body it's all the same. This does not mean that managers and peers need to become therapists as well as colleagues. However, managers are uniquely positioned to be able to see some of the stress from a different point of view and identify the impact it might be having on their team and to be comfortable inviting conversations and lending support or company resources as appropriate.

6. LIVE YOUR VALUES

You can't solve every employee's life issues at work, but managers can empower employees to take accountability for all the choices they make, and that includes how they enrich their lives outside of the office. Peers also play a role in showing support and encourage each other to express elements of their non-work lives. It's very common that many people who are struggling with work-life balance can be avoiding "life" by hiding at work. One way managers can support employees is through ensuring they have professional development plans and encouraging them to add a personal development goal to such plans.

7. OWN IT

The bottom line: work-life balance is an absolute individual choice. It's not up to anyone else to dictate or act on; it's not determined by management, leadership, significant others, friends, or children. It is for each individual to choose how to respond or react to the triggers and challenges presented each day in and outside of work that may affect each person's needs for balance.

THE FUTURE IS UNWRITTEN

It's not up to managers to solve employees' life issues. However, in a role of leadership, managers can work to empower those who work for them to take accountability for all the choices they make, and that includes how and when they work, what they work on, and how they feel while they are at work. The study of human behavior tells us that when people feel empowered in one area of their life, they tend to be able to better navigate issues and struggles in other areas of their life.

There is no right or wrong place to begin making different choices when the triggers of imbalance appear. At the same time, there is no way an organization or individual can transform overnight, over a month or even over a quarter; these types of individual and organizational behavior shifts take time to integrate. Being overly aggressive and trying to change too much too fast, likely will prove largely unsuccessful. Starting with the symptom where the pain the greatest is not a wrong choice, if the organization is also willing to address the systemic causes and offer a framework and support for different choices.

When people at all levels of the organizations have better awareness regarding the global realities and universal triggers of work-life balance, the organization can truly begin to create an behavior shift. The best part about this unconscious corporate crisis is that it can easily be averted through accountability and conscious choices. It's never too late to build a future that is different from the past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2008 Jae Ellard founded WLB Consulting Group with the mission to empower 10 million people to make the choice to own their lives. After 4 years of working countless hours crafting messaging and online content for executives at Microsoft, Jae collapsed from stress-related adrenal fatigue directly attributed to the way she was living her life. This life-altering experience propelled Jae deep into research on human behavior, neuroscience, organizational relationship systems, and co-active coaching. The result has been 3 books—STOP & Think, Success with Stress, and The Pocket Coach—along with employee development workshops designed to create employee accountability and awareness around work-life balance and stress management at all levels in the organization. Jae has taught worked work-life awareness workshops to thousands of employees in over 25 countries including China, Russia, India, Japan, Brazil, Argentina, United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

Jae's work is based on The Awareness Framework, a methodology developed to identify blocking behaviors and create opportunities to improve organizational communication and relationships. Based on Jae's personal experience, years of research, and hundreds of interviews and workshops, the framework is designed to empower people to create awareness around their behavior, identify the impact of their behavior, and seek better results. It's widely known that behavior has an impact and that there is a result, whether intentional or unintentional, related to the behavior. When people choose to or are empowered to become more aware of their behavior (hence the name), they are able to be more accountable in their roles and to their teams, more authentic in their communication, and more awake in their environment (both literally and figuratively). The impact to the team is a shift in the team's ability to be more innovative and more productive on multiple levels. The result is sustainable success for both the organization and the individual.

Jae has an extensive background in writing and communication with a master's degree in communication management from Colorado State University and a bachelor's degree in broadcast communication from Metropolitan State College of Denver. She holds certificates in co-active coaching and organizational relationship systems coaching and lives in Seattle, Washington.