As I sit down to write this chapter, I already envision a lot of resistance from you, the reader, to the idea that the pursuit of work-life balance as a goal is hazardous. After all, you have spent a lot of time and energy invested in the idea that it is a good thing; and you have been told that the more balance you have, the better off you are. Then, here I come to tell you that everything you were told, and everything you believed in up to now, is bad for you.

I understand. But, the greatest wisdom any of us has ever received came as a surprise. They were words that shocked us into a new reality. The conversation I hope to have with you here provides a fresh perspective on how to process the realities of your everyday life a little differently. After all, you are not an observer to the happenings in your life’s journey. You are the captain. You guide the ship. My goal is to provide you the courage to embrace the things you know are right for your life, discard erroneous concepts, and reshape that invaluable piece of art called YOU!

My goal here is to show that you need a paradigm shift from the status quo (i.e. work-life balance is good) so that you can truly lead a more productive and rewarding life.
NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

Let us first look at what is meant by the concept Work-Life Balance in common every day parlance, before we look at what is wrong with it and why you need a paradigm shift. Believe me, adjusting to new realities takes hard work, but pays high wages.

Work-Life balance is generally defined as balancing work priorities and home priorities by adjusting the time spent on each, so neither becomes all-engulfing and crowds out the other areas of life.

Here are some common threads in most of the definitions of Work and Life:

• WORK is what we do from 9 to 5, and what we do after 5 is LIFE.
• What we do for a paycheck is WORK, and what we do for fun is LIFE.
• What someone else tells us to do, and judges us by how well we do it, is WORK; what we choose to do and how we judge ourselves by the outcome is LIFE.

Clearly, the assumptions behind these ideas are that:

• Work is not life, and, life is not work
• When you are doing one, you are not doing the other
• They are on two ends of the spectrum, and need to be in balance in order for you to live a satisfying and rewarding life.

When you dichotomize work and life and see them as two ends of the spectrum, it brings about what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” You feel cognitive dissonance when you believe in one thing, but end up doing the opposite. For example, your value system says your family is the most important thing in your life, but you end up spending most of your wakeful hours at work. So, when you devote too much time to work, you feel guilty about neglecting the home and personal life; when you are at home, or on vacation, you feel guilty about the unfinished work.

But the greatest conflict is found in the work-a-holics on the one end,
and the housewives and house husbands (and those forced out of gainful employment) on the other; they feel the most cognitive dissonance about the “lack-of-balance.”

Most of the writers in the area of work-life balance contribute to, and even exacerbate, the problem. Why do I say that, you ask? The most common “prescription” coming out of work-life balance writers and bloggers is essentially the same: “Prioritize the different aspects of your life and schedule an appropriate amount of time for each.”

Here is an example of such a recommendation from Laura Berman Fortgang, the author of “Now What? 90 Days to a New Life Direction.” She suggests these five steps:

1. Figure out what really matters to you in life
2. Drop unnecessary activities
3. Protect your private time
4. Accept help to balance your life
5. Plan fun and relaxation

That sounds like reasonable advice, right? But, what happens if you cannot segregate your life into neat little chunks of time capsules or fit into a rigid schedule on your appointment book? Are the calendar and the appointment book really the appropriate tools for solving the work-life balance problem?

Problems arise when you don’t see life as an “integrated whole” but as a “combination of pieces.” The consequences are guilt, overwhelm, inner conflict, disappointment at not being the superwoman or superman and magically accomplishing everything on your plate.

One of the immediate consequences that I see in my interviews with people is the “blame game” –

1. You blame yourself for not having the “discipline” to balance the various activities in your life, and for becoming overwhelmed and frustrated;
2. You blame your work or your employer for de-humanizing you by blackmailing you with a paycheck and making you a slave to the desk, or the computer screen, or the clock.
Obviously, neither of these are productive responses to the resolution of cognitive dissonance. So where do we go from here? Is Work-life balance an exercise in futility? Why do efforts to sequester personal life from professional life only lead to greater frustration and less satisfaction while they are lauded by the experts as the panacea for a better quality of life?

It is because when you try to “protect” personal life from work, you are subscribing to an untenable dichotomy. When you place your time in porous mental compartments, you will invariably be frustrated when one bleeds over into the other. The overarching theme of such a dichotomy is the idea that happiness at home and at work can be achieved by giving equal weight to each side and keeping them in balance on the scale of life.

Does anyone really believe that life and work are of equal weights?

Let me start by saying that work-life balance is a myth. It is like a goal post with wings. As soon as you get a little closer to it, it moves a few inches away. Pursuing that myth and trying to balance work and life, as if it were the 11th commandment of life, has serious negative consequences; overwhelm, guilt and confusion over what one’s priorities are in life. By getting busy balancing the things you do, you escape the need to question what you do, and its relevance to who you are. To solve the problem, you buy books and go to seminars seeking the holy grail of work-life balance.

The work-life balance concept has many accomplices such as time management and stress management. This has become an industry all unto itself. Motivational speakers and books claiming to reveal the secret of success give us temporary highs that are rarely sustained.

While good time management and stress management are valid concepts, they do not fully reflect the issues of balancing work life with personal life. For quite some time now, the work-life balance frustrations have been addressed by looking at how to be more productive. As a society, we have become committed to the concept of greater productivity. But here is the critical point you miss. Being committed means nothing if you are committed to the wrong path. The balance should really be between what you do and who you are, what your purpose and passion is in life. It’s not between you and your job or your appointment book.
It is accomplished by balancing your daily activities with your true self. It is the alignment with your core identity that makes you feel alive and even thrive.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 67% of American workers are unhappy in their present work situation. Imagine the mental health consequences of spending most of your wakeful hours in an unhappy environment. If the best you can muster at work is the feeling of “I just work here… it is not my life,” it contributes to the malaise. It disconnects you from being your best and doing your best. It is certainly not conducive to tapping the best in yourself. And, when you are weighed down by unhappiness, conflict, frustration and stress, the physical and mental health consequences for the overall quality of life you lead, are gigantic. Considering that you spend a large amount of your wakeful hours at work, your unhappiness at work undoubtedly spills over into unhappiness at home. That is a double whammy for your physical and emotional health!

**WHAT IF**

- What if you could obliterate this dichotomy of work and life by infusing both together into one?
- What if you could make life into work and work into life and make them both fun?
- What if you could create a scenario where work and fun are not opposites but complimentary?
- What if you could see them as two sides of the same coin?
- Will this change the happiness quotient? Would this improve your quality of life?

Working for a “job” vs. working for an identity that is rewarding and life sustaining—that makes all the difference in the world. Time and energy spent on your life and giving it more meaning and joy will help put other aspects of your life in proper context. And even though you must return to the doldrums of corporate work, having the subtext of knowing why you are there will change how you view what you do on a daily basis. The same duties, the same phone calls, the same things that once got under your skin will start to lose their fever.
Look at it this way. How long could you dig a hole if you know $10 million in gold nuggets waited for you a hundred feet deep? The answer is you could dig as long as it took to get to it. When you find your heart, your true identity, you’ll be able to dig without frustration because you know what you’re digging for. Your identity represents those pieces of gold.

The most balanced people I know have sharp distinctions between making money and making meaning. They use money to fuel meaning, not use money to create the meaning for their lives.

Here is a woman named Cheryl who had some insightful comments to make in one of the Internet forums about how she arrived at her personal sense of work-life balance. “I would say finding flexibility and/or control over my work schedule is my number one work/life balance issue. Although I am an empty-nester with the ability to work 100 hours a week if I wanted to, I don’t want to! I am a dependable, dedicated, passionate worker with varied skills but I want some flexibility in my work schedule. I do not want to sit in an office M-F from 9-5…. I have aging parents, new grandchildren, many friends and a retired husband. We like to travel or have lunch together during the week.”

Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first woman director of policy planning at the State Department recently left her “foreign-policy dream job” as she described it, to care for her family and fulfill her parental responsibilities. She felt the stress of her work identity playing a greater role in her life than she felt was desirable. This was in spite of the fact that she had a very supportive husband who picked up a lot of the slack when she left for Washington.

On the opposite end of the spectrum of choices, the Daily Mail in UK recently published an article by Isabella Dutton who says having children was the biggest regret of her life, which raised a considerable storm of controversy. Here too, we find that “balance” according to other peoples’ definition does not bring you happiness or personal satisfaction.

Sheryl Sandberg’s new book, “Lean-In” talks about the internal as well as institutional roadblocks to achieving work-life balance in women and how they can climb those walls. Interestingly enough, her book has also received considerable support as well as criticism for not adequately addressing the issues of balance for working mothers. One critique
leveled against her is that most working mothers operate under extreme social and economic impediments leading to guilt and conflict between work life and family life, rather than because of a lack of lean-in self-confidence.

These feelings of guilt and conflict over life choices point to the mixed messages from society to the professional women as to what is the right balance between the priorities of work and life. The conflict of balance also afflicts men but to a much less extent, since it is a more inner need than societal dictates on how they “should” balance their lives.

These conflicts and cognitive dissonance are not limited to the high profile cases such as the ones I described above. After playing the game of climbing the corporate ladder for twenty or thirty years, many of us look down this ladder only to find our healthiest, most vibrant days gone. And sadly, we spent these days working on the dreams of others. This is what men and women of all walks of life have been struggling with for decades. The general sense of running without getting anywhere is not because people are inadequate, but because our value system is. We have to stop simply talking about the paradox of work-life balance and the guilt of choosing between the professional life and the personal life. It’s time to fix it.

How do we fix it? Start redefining your life around your purpose and passion in life. Everything you do in your life needs to revolve around that sense of identity and self-definition. Ask yourself the question: “Who am I? Where am I going? What do I want out of my life? What would make me feel at the end of my life that I have lived a purposeful, meaningful and satisfying life?”

In this context, let me bring what I call the “Principle of 3Ms” and what we can learn from it. The 3Ms I refer to are Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. By most people’s definition, their life was one-dimensional and very unbalanced – they had one purpose, one goal and everything else was secondary to that purpose. My contention is that indeed they were the most balanced; not the people who tout balance as a jigsaw puzzle where you try and fit many disparate pieces together. They had clarity, instead of confusion, about who they were and what their life was about.
You don’t need to be a carbon copy of Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa, to learn from them and benefit from their life’s lessons. They can be valuable guideposts in redefining your own life that rejects the old, outmoded concepts like work-life balance and replaces them with more meaningful concepts that celebrate your own unique purpose in life.
About Dr. Sereena

Dr. Serena Reep is the President of Transformational Communications. She is an ex-College Professor, communication and relationship management coach, corporate project management trainer, author and motivational speaker. She considers herself a social-entrepreneur and likes to promote social causes in all her ventures.

Serena Reep received her Ph.D. in Social Psychology. Her specialization is Social Structure and Personality. She also holds an active PMP (Project Management Professional) certification. She frequently speaks on best practices in communication for successful project management as well as successful interpersonal relationship management. She spent eight years as a Professor at Rutgers University, and has been a consultant in the corporate world for almost two decades. She has worked as a contractor/consultant for clients ranging from private corporations such as CA, NCS and IBM to government agencies such as the DOE, CMS and FDIC.

Dr. Serena is the recipient of the National Association of Bestselling Authors award in 2012 for her work in the book Success Secrets with Jack Canfield. She has been seen on NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox affiliates. She has been interviewed by Arielle Ford on the “Meet the Experts” program. She is an Expert Blogger for the Fast Company and the Huffington Post. Her book Work-Life Balance is DEAD! is a very thought provoking and paradigm-shifting manifesto on living an authentic life, unfettered by the weight of outmoded constructs about balancing work and life. She also sounds a wake-up call to the corporations on the effectiveness of the work-life balance perks they provide and offers a fresh perspective on increasing their ROI.

To learn more about her work or to contact Dr. Serena Reep for your speaking or training needs, please visit: http://serenasez.com.