



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Work/Life Balance in Exactly Seven Words

By J. Patrick Kinney



One of the important aspects of management and personal development for busy actuaries is the balance between work and the rest of our lives. The most effective leaders are those who are able to develop a personal leadership foundation centered on their own self-understanding. What is it that we want out of our jobs? Our careers? Our lives? Many people may never have taken an opportunity to put their own thoughts into words.

Over the course of my life and career so far, I've developed an approach to work/life balance that I thought would be fun to share with Management & Personal Development (MPD) Section members in this article. If you find it entertaining, there's even a way you can participate for a future article in *The Stepping Stone*!

My basic idea is that the principles of balance are summarized in seven-word phrases. Why seven words? No particular reason, other than that seven is a traditional "magic number" that has been used very successfully by other authors! It also happens that my first principle has seven words, and as time went on I just built on that. The seven-word phrases may be literal and/or metaphorical. In this article, I will share with you my own seven-word

guideposts, in the order I adopted them, with a little explanation of each.

"READ THE COMICS AND LAUGH OUT LOUD."

This one developed early on. I still remember spreading the newspaper out on the floor as a little kid, poring over the comics pages. It didn't happen every day, but how satisfying it was when something struck my funny bone! This way I learned at a young age to find enjoyment in humor. I also used to enjoy the *Reader's Digest* feature called "Laughter is the Best Medicine." There's a lot to be said for that idea; according to the Mayo Clinic website, "Whether you're guiltily guffawing at an episode of *South Park* or quietly giggling at the latest *New Yorker* cartoon, laughing does you good. Laughter is a great form of stress relief, and that's no joke."¹

Unfortunately, as we "grow up" in school and work environments, we tend to inhibit our natural response to humor. Sure, it can sometimes be embarrassing to burst into guffaws or giggles in front of others—but sharing our reaction to the foibles of work and life can also result in better relationships with friends and colleagues. In fact, the CEO of my company is a big fan of "Dilbert"



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and makes a point of including a comic strip in his company-wide leadership presentations. It's a great icebreaker; collectively enjoying the humor in familiar business situations helps people work together to overcome the daily problems confronting us on the job.

"TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE WHENEVER YOU CAN."

I mean this quite literally. Especially these days, with mobile devices and split-second online mapping tools that tell us the fastest way to drive from point A to point B, we risk bypassing much beauty and history that can enrich our lives and understanding. I have always enjoyed the traditional fold-out maps that highlight scenic routes and points of interest. Next time you can create even a little extra time for yourself, I suggest following the proverbial road less traveled, and keeping your eyes and mind open as you go. Some of my best thinking is done on country roads, rather than the interstate. Read historical markers in towns along the way. Stop at scenic overlooks. Look around. Discover something. (For a super special treat, look straight up on a clear dark night.) The places and people we encounter off the beaten path can expand our historical perspective, our cultural awareness, and our emotional intelligence. Embrace serendipity. You'll find the trip more relaxing as well, and you can arrive at your destination less stressed.

The metaphorical application of this principle to our careers I will leave to the experts.

"LIFE'S TOO SHORT TO WORK FOR A*****S [JERKS]."

Okay, I had to clean this one up a little. And purists may quibble about that apostrophe. I can't even claim originality. But this may be the most important idea on this list. While I believe that most people in the business world are reasonable, and with a little effort you can get along with almost anyone, there may come a point in your career where you find yourself stuck with a boss who's just a total [jerk]. Luckily for me, this happened only once in 30 years. In such a situation, you'll find your stress levels rising, your work/life balance deteriorating, and your happiness—and work effectiveness—diminishing. Unless you can see a light at the end of the tunnel, and can adapt to this person's behavior as only a temporary bump in the road, in

this situation I recommend that you take charge of your own life and career, and find a way to move on in another job.

"MY FAVORITE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WORD IS DADDY."

For me, this realization came later in life than most. When my first son was born I was almost 39. My wife correctly pointed out that having a child is the most irrevocable thing we'd ever done. My sons are now 14, 12 and 9. Hardly a day has gone by that I don't think about how my family is the most important aspect of my life. Applying this principle means putting a high priority on school concerts, soccer games and teacher meetings, driving the kids to summer camp ... many of you know the drill. I've been fortunate to be able to navigate my career to places that allow this type of balance to be maintained.

Not every reader of this article is a parent, so to adapt this principle to your own circumstances, just substitute your own favorite word. Hint: It's probably not "employee," "executive" or even "actuary." Whatever it is for you, make sure you take the time to feed and support your favorite word throughout your career.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN.

I realize, of course, that my personal seven-word philosophies may not work for everyone, at all stages of our lives and careers. I encourage you to come up with your own. The crucial thing is to give some thought to what principles of balance will contribute to your own personal growth and leadership foundation.

For those of you who choose to share your thoughts with other MPD Section members, I have volunteered to produce a follow-up article for this newsletter. Send me your own seven-word phrases, with or without a sentence or two of explanation, and I will compile the responses for a future issue—subject to editorial judgment and space limitations, of course. Only phrases of exactly seven words will be considered. Aficionados of other magic numbers will have to write their own articles! ●

ENDNOTE

¹ <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034>, accessed Aug. 29, 2013.