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Seven-Word Work/Life Balance (Part Two)

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**Build a business case
for yourself, and
your employer.**

In my previous article for *The Stepping Stone*,¹ I shared my motif of expressing personal self-understanding in phrases of exactly seven words. Why seven words? No particular reason, other than that seven is a traditional “magic number.” At the conclusion of that article, I asked readers to submit their own seven-word phrases for a follow-up article. I am happy to share with you several responses I received. As advertised, only phrases of exactly seven words were considered. Aficionados of other magic numbers will have to write their own articles!

“What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”

This maxim of Nietzsche became former Management and Personal Development (MPD) chair Olga Jacobs’ “personal mantra ... uttered under my breath during the most hectic times of implementing health care reform.” See her “Diary of a Health Care Reform Actuary” in the October 2013 issue of *Health Watch*. I’m sure by now Olga has the strength of Conan the Barbarian (where I first saw the above phrase used!).

“Mover and shaker, not an order taker.”

This is another gem from Olga, which she describes as “the vision I had for the actuarial team I led in a prior role. We were to develop original analyses ... to come to the table with the problem and the solution. I didn’t want the actuarial team to simply be a passive group that let others (CEOs, Sales, Underwriting, Products) define and solve problems while we just implemented (do the rate filing, price the new product, etc.).” Good advice for actuaries in general.

“Do not be afraid to make mistakes.”

John Stark interpreted my phrase “Take the Scenic Route Whenever You Can” in two ways: “One is not to use linear thinking in solving a problem—wander around and see how many different solutions you can devise. Next, do not be afraid to make mistakes. Actuaries as a group do not like to make mistakes, and our business culture as a whole

frowns on errors. There are many instances when an error led to greater insights.” Good advice when judiciously applied.

“Balance requires compromise; pick your battles carefully.”

These words of wisdom come from the prolific Sara Teppema, who explains: “Making choices about your career should be done carefully, setting priorities [based on] your personal values. Sometimes this means letting go of conventional priorities, such as getting promoted to a job you don’t really want just for the sake of getting promoted. Or, sometimes getting the job you don’t really like could temporarily provide needed flexibility for a family situation. Build a business case for yourself, and your employer.”

“Whatever you are, be a good one.”

Sara also submitted this related quote, often attributed to Lincoln. She interprets this to mean “Don’t get caught up in what others think you should be doing. Do what you like and do it well (and do what you like because you do it well).”

“Whatever you are doing now, be present.”

Again, from Sara: “If you can focus on your priority for this moment, you will feel less distracted and more productive. This is easier said than done when balancing work, children’s activities, aging parents, keeping a household together and people fed, etc. But if you can learn to focus on what you are doing right now, it can actually relieve stress.” I would add that this is a good argument for shutting off the phones, instant messaging and email when trying to accomplish something. (A lesson not learned while writing this article, unfortunately!)

“Where are you now: relaxing, recovering, planning?”

A wise woman once said to Sara that “you should always be in one of three states: On vacation, recovering from your last vacation, or planning your next vacation. In other words, always know

that there is a break in sight.” Throughout my own career, I would agree that I have always felt more effective and well-adjusted when I knew I had something to look forward to.

“Take your kids back to their schools.”

Our own newsletter editor John Hadley contributed this family-oriented advice. He writes: “By the way, I particularly resonate with the comments about going to school functions, etc. Last summer, we were facing my son moving to Chicago to start an MFA program at the Art Institute. It occurred to me to suggest (first to my wife, of course!) that I drive him out there so he wouldn’t have to worry about shipping all of his stuff.

“I took the week off, except for a few conference calls [*oops—JPK*], and he and I spent a few nights in a hotel while we found him an apartment and outfitted it. Even though it was a long drive home on my own from Chicago to New Jersey, it definitely felt like the right thing to have done, and he really appreciated the help and the company.”

Let me end with this final submission from Sara Teppema, to which I can only add “hear, hear!”

“Work life balance isn’t just for women!”

I hope these articles help contribute to your own sense of balance in your lives. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ “Seven-Word Work/Life Balance” published in the November 2013 issue of *The Stepping Stone*.



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