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Forget balance: Focus is the key

Career Intelligence

BARBARA MOSES

Work-life balance has become a new kind of mantra, expounded upon endlessly at conferences, in newspaper articles and on television. I will admit to having devoted many column inches to the subject.

Yet, I'm beginning to wonder, given everyone's apparent desire to achieve a state of work-life balance and their conspicuous inability to do so, whether the whole idea is meaningful, still less attainable. Perhaps work-life balance is like perfect love, something you can pursue but never find.

There's no doubt that many people have a serious problem trying to fulfill the many roles demanded of them at work, at home and in their personal lives. A recent Health Canada survey shows that one in four Canadians works more than 50 hours a week, compared with just one in 10 a decade ago. Nearly 60 per cent of respondents complained of high "role overload" in juggling their work and personal lives, almost double the number in 1991.

But is the solution really to find a better balance? It may be that the whole concept of "work-life balance" tends to obscure what we're really looking for, namely the opportunity to feel good about our lives and to have a sense of accomplishment.

The problem with the term "work-life balance" is that it assumes we all have a caloric budget for meeting a prescribed set of needs — such as time for family, friends, children and loved ones, aesthetic pursuits, spiritual nourishment and intellectual engagement — choosing just the right amount of each as if they were major food groups. But there is no Canada Food Guide to tell us how to live our lives.

The truth is, we all have different needs, and those needs are constantly changing. Our lives are dynamic. Children are born, loved ones get sick, we land a new job or lose one, develop an entirely new interest. At different points in our lives, different events and priorities compete for our attention, and we focus on whatever is most important to us at that moment.

You may be doing a piece of work that completely enralls you, for example, or you may be preparing for the birth of your first child. Whatever your main focus is at a particular point in time will by definition take away from your ability to pay attention to other important things. And no matter how hard you strive to achieve "balance," there inevitably will be tensions between competing needs: between the desire for spiritual nourishment and the need to make money, for example, or between the desire for personal and family time and the yearning for advancement. These conflicts are not necessarily bad: They are what makes us grow as human beings.

If I were to ask you to think about a time when you felt really good about yourself and your life, my best guess is that you would describe a period when you felt completely and single-mindedly involved in something, whether mastering a sport, losing weight, doing a piece of work that was totally engrossing, or complete engagement with your kids or someone you care about. Was your life in balance at that point?

See MOSES on page C9



JERRY SILVERBERG/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Why we don't pull together



It all comes down to fear of failure: If you make a decision, you have to live with the consequences. But letting one person take the responsibility sets the stage for mass failure. There are ways to share the load, ROGER MARTIN writes

Humans have a natural tendency toward all-or-nothing thinking when it comes to leadership and responsibility, and our responses are dynamic and infectious.

One person makes a quick assessment of the situation and tries to take charge. But the strong statement "I'm in charge . . ." almost always carries with it the unspoken ". . . and you're not." In most cases, the signal "I'm in charge and you're not" prompts the other party to send a corresponding signal: "Fine. I understand. You're in charge and I'm not." Those initial signals, both the heroic and the passive, begin a cascade of reactions that lead to eventual failure.

The heroic party reacts to the first flinch of hesitation, the first sign of passivity, by trying to fill what he sees as a void. This causes the passive party to see himself as being further marginalized, which prompts a further retreat, until he has abdicated all responsibility. And so it goes.

Near the end of the cycle the passive party is distant, cynical, and lethargic. Then the heroic party, contemptuous of the other and angry for having to bear the full weight alone, collapses under the burden.

But it's not only the heroic leader who gets crushed. The taint of failure is distributed to everyone involved. This leadership model undermines collaboration, generates mistrust and misunderstanding, and eventually causes the choice-making skills of both leaders and followers to decline.

The dynamic of heroic leadership, unilaterally imposed, can infect any relationship, and it can spread through an organization

like a virus. It's also true that the roles are not fixed. The same person can be the would-be hero in one situation and the passive follower in the next. But what I call the "Responsibility Virus" always begins with the germ of fear.

In numerous studies, psychologists have shown just how much we dread having done the wrong thing, so much so that we go to great lengths to avoid making choices, or even viewing ourselves as choosers. Irving Janis, a social psychologist and leading scholar of group behavior, and his co-workers found that the heart rate of participants in their experiments quickened considerably as they were about to find out whether or not they had made the "right choice," the one that would align with their preferences. And the social and cognitive psychologist Leon Festinger showed that many people avoid choices between options that are at least at first blush equally desirable by postponing them, or by pretending there is no choice to be made because the options are identical, or by pretending that the choice has already been made for them, or by distorting the negative aspects of one option and the positive aspects of another to the point that, once again, there is no choice at all to be made.

The presence of colleagues with whom we could share the burden of choice-making responsibility should have the effect of getting us beyond worries about regret and failure, and thus enhancing our ability to choose well. Sadly, the opposite happens time and time again. In situations in which responsibility could be reasonably and effectively shared, the fear of failure tends to trigger one of the two extreme responses we've just

Power of the powerless

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, dissident, and eventual president of the Czech Republic, understood the power of the individual and wrote persuasively about it in his inspirational essay "Power of the Powerless." Written in 1978, long before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of the Soviet empire, the essay took the form of a letter of encouragement to the striking Polish ship workers at Gdansk. The outlawed Solidarity union had occupied the shipyards, but the authorities, rather than entering yards by force and arresting the strikers, a messy affair likely to be covered negatively by the international press, sought to starve and freeze the strikers into submission. Not a bad strategy in the cold Polish winter!

The workers no doubt felt largely powerless against the might of an arm of the powerful Soviet state, but Havel encouraged them to see their inherent power. He told of a shopkeeper in what was then the Soviet Union who was ordered to put a sign in his window reading "Workers of the world unite!" The shopkeeper knows the slogan is a hollow lie, but is inclined to put it in his window rather than face harsh retribution for civil disobedience. However, by putting the sign in his window, he sends a signal to all who pass that he is bowing to the will of the totalitarian

ian state, and thereby strengthening it.

If instead the humble shopkeeper refuses to place the sign in his window and endures the punishment, he sends an incredibly powerful signal to the authorities and everyone who knows what he did, that the state is not omnipotent. This will cause the state to crumble, and crumble more quickly than anyone can imagine.

Havel's message to the strikers was to recognize that however powerless they felt, they had the power to crumble an empire. Prophetic words for 1978. The Polish strikers, with no ability to physically challenge Soviet power, unleashed a tidal wave of change that within a decade demolished the all-powerful Soviet state.

Havel's lessons apply equally to the more mundane world of the Responsibility Virus. The seemingly powerless individual is indeed full of power. Even though the Virus is everywhere and is reinforced by the norms of society and by our very instincts, we, as individuals, always have the ability to stop it. We can use the four tools to help us take baby steps in the right direction. We need no one's permission or concurrence. We simply need to act.

From The Responsibility Virus, by Roger L. Martin

described. Both undermine the possibility of productive collaboration.

The Responsibility Virus is as pervasive — and as ancient — as the common cold. The philosopher Hegel described the tendency to flip from dominance to subservience, what he called "the master-slave dialect," as being one of the driving forces of human history.

It appears in contexts both trivial and tragic. You can see it on the basketball court when a gifted player is too dominant. A solo per-

formance by someone of exceptional talent can get the job done for a while, but then the rest of the teammates become disengaged. Being shut out of the offense leads to standing around on defense, which leads to a losing season, no matter how great the shooting statistics racked up by their MVP.

In its most insidious manifestations, the Responsibility Virus has played a role in many a business scandal, and worse, many a political atrocity.

See EXCERPT on page C10

Learn from failure and move forward

EXCERPT from page C1

Whenever parties within any organizational structure claim victim status, when they say they were "duped" or were "just following orders," we know there's been an outbreak of the Virus. . . .

While the Virus is pervasive, it's only recently been identified. That's why attempts to remedy the problem heretofore have been off the mark. In most cases, the attempted remedy has been to alter organizational structure as if formal lines of authority and job descriptions were the only features that mattered.

The most dominant voice in this chorus has been the "empowerment" school, which argues that responsibility is held too centrally at the top. The theory is that a military-style, hierarchical command-and-control approach disempowers members of the organization who, feeling like pawns in a game or puppets controlled by a powerful master, underachieve relative to their actual abilities. This line of

thinking suggests that if leaders loosened their controlling grip and relentlessly pushed down choice-making responsibility and accountability in their organizations, they would unleash a tidal wave of enthusiastic action and collaboration by their now-empowered colleagues. According to this argument, such empowered organizations would out-compete their command-and-control competitors.

I watched this movement play out in a number of my consulting clients and saw little of its promise realized. Instead, I witnessed a high rate of failure. "Empowered" employees rarely felt the enthusiasm predicted and did not produce the tidal wave of positive action forecast. Throwing high levels of responsibility on them on the basis of the empowerment doctrine rather than in relation to their underlying capabilities was more likely to produce disempowerment, confusion, and low morale.

My many years of strategy con-

sulting to myriad diverse organizations convinced me that the roots of the Responsibility Virus are not to be found on an org chart but within our deepest human motivations. Like the gamblers studied by Ellen Langer, who want to take responsibility for their predictions once they win, but blame chance whenever their hunches turn out to be wrong, it is human nature to claim credit when things go well and to avoid blame when they go badly. It's a matter of minimizing the risks of social failure while maximizing the personal gains of positive events. These are the inner drives that push us to the extremes of over-responsibility and under-responsibility.

The choice is often triggered by our reaction to other actions taken by the other parties involved, even if the reaction is minor. A small flinch or look of confusion can provoke a "heroic" response. A confident expression or firm tone can provoke a passive response. In turn, the other parties involved make decisions based on the actions they see taken, decisions to become more over- or under-responsible.

But the infection doesn't stop there. The Virus propels the heroic leader to a failure generated by taking on more responsibility than any one person can carry. But then, as over-responsible leaders approach the point of failure, they do an abrupt turnaround, flipping to an under-responsible stance in order to insulate themselves from the pain and responsibility they see looming. "I was set up," leaders often say. "Nobody else did their part." "It was never meant to be." But by suddenly denying responsibility, the leader sends a message to the passive followers.

Although they sat back and watched, putting the responsibility for success in the hands of the heroic leader, the followers are not insulated from the outcome. They experience two things simultaneously: first, the pain of failure; second, the experience of the heroic leader's sudden reversal. This doubly traumatic experience jolts these followers into their own extreme reaction-flipping to over-responsibility, making sure that they are never again put into a position of being dependent on a leader who lets them down.

This vacillation between over- and under-responsibility is an endless loop. Fear of failure drives them into an initial extreme position. The extreme positions of over- and under-responsibility drive them into failure. Failure

causes them to flip into the other extreme. And so on.

Advising leaders to stop being heroic and exhorting passive followers to become more aggressive doesn't get the job done. Heroic leaders and passive followers are pursuing what they feel, at that time and place, to be the optimal course of action. And organizational fixes don't help, because distributing or centralizing power doesn't change the personal dynamic in this intensely personal exchange. Unless you attack this dynamic of fear itself, heroic leaders and passive followers will pop up where they are not supposed to be, no matter what the formal organizational structure.



Merely adding players to a choice-making situation doesn't help either, as the literature on "groupthink" makes clear, as does the literature on conformity to group norms and actions. In those cases, the presence of others in a choice-making situation simply makes the decisionmaker less sure of his or her own authority to render a judgment.

This state of affairs creates no end of frustration and an almost-inexhaustible supply of material for Dilbert cartoons. Groups formed to make decisions or better decisions flounder and fail. Frustration with decisions by committee leads to a clarion call for "single-point accountability."

The net result of these all-too-

human dynamics is that, as firms get larger and can dedicate more and more managers to a given problem, they don't get better choices; if anything, they get significantly worse ones.

While the choices get bigger and more complex, the resources that can be applied effectively to choices become no greater, because collaboration is ineffective or absent, neutralized by the Responsibility Virus. Thus decision-making failures become more prevalent and the call is for leadership that is yet more heroic. The expectation of yet more heroic leadership merely intensifies the viral strain, which causes still more failure, followed by a call for yet more heroic leadership, and so on and so on.

It is no wonder then that there is such a fascination with heroic leaders and, in the business world, the cult of the CEO. But this merely feeds the Virus, creating ever-greater levels of mistrust and misunderstanding. Heroic leaders, who don't understand how their own actions help create passive followers, grow to see the followers as pathetic and undeserving of their leadership. Passive followers, who similarly are blind to their role in creating isolated, heroic leaders, grow to see the leaders as domineering and unsympathetic. Each questions the motives of the other and resentment takes over.

As failure looms, followers become angry with leaders for letting them down. Leaders become angry with followers for not lifting a finger to help. Neither is able to see his or her role in creating the pathology and the failure, and instead blames the other. Both resolve never to let this happen again. But to ensure that it won't, they simultaneously flip to opposite extremes of responsibility, which makes it likely that it indeed will happen again, because nothing has been learned from the failure.

The combination of failure with the failure to learn from failure produces little advancement in the decisionmaking skills of leaders. Rather than learning from the failed choices, the passive followers simply blame the leader, which means that they don't test and improve their choice-making skills.

These skills can atrophy just as surely as my tennis game would atrophy if I spent all my time up against players much weaker or much stronger than I am. Erosion in these skills is hugely threatening in a world of large, complex networked organizations and coali-

tions and alliances in which joint choice-making and effective collaboration is a necessity. Without better skills in productively sharing responsibility, these twenty-first-century organizations and organizational forms will lead to chaos and inertia.

During two decades of work with organizations struggling to overcome the Responsibility Virus, I have devised a set of tools that get beyond the organizational chart and go to the heart of the problem.

The first tool is "The Choice Structuring Process," a method that helps group members collaborate productively with one another rather than leaping instinctively to heroic leadership or passive followership. It harnesses the power of a group to make more inspired and robust decisions, and commit to them, than any individual could achieve alone.

The second tool — "The Frame Experiment" — helps individuals who are stuck in over- or under-responsibility and experiencing mistrust or misunderstanding to improve their relationship and their ability to collaborate with the individual in question.

The third — "The Responsibility Ladder" — is a developmental tool that helps subordinates work with their bosses to build their ability to take on responsibility and prevent their bosses from becoming over-responsible.

The fourth tool is a more productive "Redefinition of Leadership and Followership" that helps both leaders and followers avoid falling into the extremes of over- and under-responsibility.

Taken together, these tools can help each of us fight to suppress the heroic leader who lurks below the surface in every tough decisionmaking situation. They can help us deal with our fear of failure in a way that allows a different model of leading and following to emerge. The payoff is better collaboration, better decisions for our organizations, better understanding and trust of our colleagues, and faster skill-building for all of us.

Excerpted from *The Responsibility Virus: How Control Freaks, Shrinking Violets — and the Rest Of Us — Can Harness the Power Of True Partnership*, by Roger L. Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. Published Oct. 8 by Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group. © 2002

Health Care / Social Services

www.gojobs.gov.on.ca

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

AUDIOLOGIST

As part of a multidisciplinary educational/clinical team with the Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf, resource services department, you will perform routine audiological assessments of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. This is a 0.6 part-time, seasonal contract, working 21.75 hours per week, three days per week, annually recurring from September to June. **Location: Milton.**

Qualifications: registration as an audiologist with the College of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists of Ontario; thorough knowledge of current audiology technology; relevant skills in/knowledge of audiological procedures to assess children of all ages; experience working with developmentally challenged deaf and hard-of-hearing children; excellent communication, interpersonal skills, including the ability to effectively communicate in American sign language; excellent report-writing, presentation skills; familiarity with ODS/OHIP billing.

Salary range: \$925 - \$1,043 per week (under review)

Resume and covering letter must be received by Oct. 11, 2002. Quoting file EDU-155, send to: Dr. Clifton F. Carbin, Program Director, Resource Services, Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf, 255 Ontario St. S., Milton, ON L9T 2M5. Fax: 905-878-0504.

SOCIAL WORKERS

The provincial schools branch requires two dedicated professionals to join our resource services department. As part of a multidisciplinary mental-health team, you will provide social-work services/case management for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their families, including assessments, counselling, group work. **Locations: Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf, Milton (one full-time, seasonal position, working 36.25 hours per week, from September to June) – File EDU-153; Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf, Belleville (one 0.6 part-time, seasonal contract, working 21.75 hours per week, annually recurring from September to June) – File EDU-154.**

Qualifications: thorough knowledge of theories/practices of professional social work, normally acquired through completion of a master's degree in social work; registration as a social worker with the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers; demonstrated experience working with deaf/hard-of-hearing students/families; excellent communication, interpersonal skills, including the ability to effectively communicate in American sign language; demonstrated counselling, case-management skills; valid driver's licence.

Salary range: \$864 - \$1,033 per week (under review)

Resume and covering letter must be received by Oct. 11, 2002. Quoting the appropriate file number(s), send to: Ministry of Education, Provincial Schools Branch, Human Resources, 255 Ontario St. S., Milton, ON L9T 2M5. Fax: 905-878-6089.



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Mental Health Wellness Clinician, Isumaqsungittukkuvik Young Offender Facility

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

IQALUIT, NU

Reporting to the Manager, Young offender Facility, you will be responsible for the provision of clinical assessment, therapeutic intervention, program development and counseling services.

Your main responsibilities will include providing clinical services, within established guidelines, in order to prepare youth for reintegration into society. This includes conducting psychological needs assessments; developing and implementing psychological case plans and providing consultative advice to primary care givers and community workers; the counseling of youth and monitoring and evaluating progress reports on youth and make recommendations to court and community workers. You will also be expected to provide behavioral development programming services for youth, within established guidelines, in order to provide opportunities for rehabilitation. Another key responsibility is to provide behavioral development programming services for youth, within established guidelines, in order to provide opportunities for rehabilitation.

Your Masters in social work degree combined with relevant work experience make you an ideal candidate for this position. A Bachelors degree in social work will also be considered for this role with at least three years of relevant work experience. You should also possess excellent problem solving ability, verbal and communication skills and have excellent counseling skills. The ability to communicate in Inuktitut would be an asset in this role.

Salary starts at \$63,726 with a Northern Living Allowance of \$11,303.

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Human Resources Officer - Nursing

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

PANGNIRTUNG, NU

Reporting to the Executive Director, you will be responsible for the recruitment and provision of HR support for professional nursing staff of the hospital and 12 public health centres in the 13 communities of Baffin Region. You will also, on occasion, provide generalist human resources advice for the Baffin Region. Your advice will be primarily sought on nursing issues in areas such as advice to management, the processing of pay documents for acting pay, performance increments as well as other human resources functions

You are ideally a seasoned HR professional with a strong emphasis on recruiting. Your Bachelors degree is complemented by at least four years of Human Resources Experience. You must have the experience and know-how to work on a high level of job competitions at the same time. You must also be self-motivated, organized and have excellent interpersonal skills to succeed in this position.

Salary starts at \$61,289 per annum plus a Northern Allowance of \$13,223.

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Health Care / Social Services



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