

# Yes, You CAN Balance Work & Family Roles

By Kelly Hannum & Jeanie Duncan

Recent research gives you the tools.

**N**onprofit leaders routinely take on multiple roles and responsibilities, both at work and in their private lives. It's a juggling act that often creates frustration and tension. Getting pulled in too many directions can make you feel as though succeeding in one part of your life means sacrificing success in another.

“You can be successful in your career and not be a work-focused person.”

The tension between work responsibilities and other life roles emerged loud and clear in research sponsored by American Express and led by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).<sup>1</sup> When researchers delved into the world of nonprofit leaders, they found that the dividing line between work and personal time has blurred. There's an increased expectation that anyone will be available at any time, regardless of where they are and what they're doing.

The lack of separation between work and personal time is particularly bothersome to younger nonprofit leaders. They report more feelings of work-family conflict than their older counterparts.

You might assume that always being available and “on the job” benefits your organization. But ironically, the opposite is more likely to be true. As your attention is fragmented and you're pulled in multiple directions, you could become a candidate for chronic stress. You may find your health suffers, your cognitive function is impaired, and your energy level plummets.

Finding a workable approach to life can benefit your well-being, relationships, and the organization you serve. Here are five steps that can help:

“There's an increased expectation that anyone will be available at any time.”

## 1. Assess Your Style. What Works for You?

Identifying your preferences can help you manage the roles you play and improve your effectiveness both on and off the job. Once you understand your patterns, you'll have a practical framework for clarifying work life/personal life tensions and coming up with possible solutions.

CCL worked with Michigan State University Distinguished Professor Ellen Ernst Kossek to identify three factors<sup>2</sup> to consider as you think about what's right for you:

**Factor 1: Identity.** When you decide how to spend your time, your most strongly valued identity is likely to win out. So think about how you see yourself. There are four possibilities. Which are you at your core?

- Are you **work-focused**? If so, you think of yourself mainly in terms of your career role.
- Are you **family focused**? Do you see yourself primarily as a parent, spouse, or friend?

<sup>1</sup> *Emerging Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: Myths, Meaning, and Motivations*, American Express and the Center for Creative Leadership, [ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/AMEXReportEmergingLeadership.pdf](http://ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/AMEXReportEmergingLeadership.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *CCL WorkLife Indicator™: Increasing Your Effectiveness On and Off the Job*, [ccl.org/leadership/assessments/WLIOverview.aspx](http://ccl.org/leadership/assessments/WLIOverview.aspx).

## “How do you see yourself at your core?”

- Are you **dual-focused**? Do you identify equally with your role at work and as part of a family?
- Are you **other-focused**? Do you invest your identity mostly in interests unconnected to work or family? You might do so, for example, if you're a runner, writer, or volunteer dedicated to a special cause.

Remember that you can be effective and successful in your career and not be a work-focused person.

**Factor 2: Behavior.** To what degree do you let one role interrupt another one? There's a continuum of possibilities:

- Are you an **integrator**? Do you blend work and personal responsibilities throughout the day?
- Are you a **separator**, who separates work and personal roles?
- Are you a **cycler**, shifting back and forth between roles, with the rhythm and degree of separation varying in response to changing circumstances?

Any of these approaches can be productive. The trick is figuring out what will work best for you in your situation.

One nonprofit executive shared a management tool that worked for him. He was notorious for allowing phone calls, text messages, and e-mail to interrupt family time. During a family meeting, he made the commitment to physically turn off his smartphone when arriving home. He described it as having “a new lease on life,” with his personal time truly dedicated to that purpose. Rather than getting behind on work, he felt recharged and was more prepared to face the day's tasks fresh and energized.

**Factor 3: Control.** The amount of control you have over your behavior is especially important. Answer these questions:

- **How much say do you have** in how you manage the boundary between your work and family life?
- **Do you make those decisions yourself?** Or do schedules or other external circumstances dictate where the boundary is drawn?

The less control you feel over how you manage boundaries, the more likely you are to become stressed out and to be less effective than you might be otherwise.

## 2. Learn about Different Approaches.

There are many ways to manage multiple roles, and it's not a one-size-fits-all challenge. Explore what others have written, and talk to coworkers and friends about what works for them.

An approach effective for someone else may not work for you at all. But finding out about various techniques increases the possibility that you'll find something that does.

Try brainstorming new approaches. For example, you might rethink how you use technology and when. If you prefer to keep a thick boundary between work and home, you might use separate mobile devices and e-mail addresses for each role, enabling you to turn off devices at key times. If you prefer to be always accessible, talk to family members and coworkers about how you'll set priorities and meet expectations.

Small changes can make a big difference. One nonprofit leader who listened to the news on her commute home found that the chatter made it harder for her to wind down from her busy workday and be

## Building a Productive & Sustainable Workplace

Issues of work-life fit don't only affect nonprofit leaders individually. They also have an impact on organizational sustainability.

With the potential of constant access, keep in mind that working more doesn't always lead to achieving more. When members of your team work nonstop, it's easy for them to burn out.

It can also be easy to get caught up in the mindset of, “If I don't see you working, you must not be working.” In some cases, people may be more productive when they're not in the office.

Help your organization set clear policies and expectations about establishing and respecting appropriate boundaries. Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

**Focus on the impact and quality** of each person's work — not just the hours worked.

**Examine whether there are embedded, cultural assumptions** that working long hours is a proxy for organizational commitment.

**Develop succession plans** across the organization. Be clear about possible career paths and what it takes to move forward.

**Pay attention to managing the emotional and physical impact** of working long hours. Be sensitive to signs of burnout in yourself and others.

**Be a role model** and promote discussions about the positive, sustainable impact of managing work and family roles.

fully present with her family. Her simple solution was to turn off the radio or to listen to relaxing music instead.

If you want to make an impact on others who are part of your nonprofit team, explore possible policy changes. A director of an art museum decided to loosen policies so individuals could deal with personal and family needs during the workday and make up the work during off hours. She established clear expectations and refocused her team on performance and deliverables — not on rigid hours that governed when the task was accomplished.

## 3. Envision a Better Life.

There are benefits and tradeoffs with any approach you take toward work-life boundaries. You can weather the stressful times more successfully, though, if you're crystal clear on your goals, priorities, and preferences.

Think through what a more sustainable version of your life would look like and why you make the choices you do. For example:

- **If you're constantly connected to your smartphone**, do you understand why you've made that choice?
- **If you're working extra hours**, what are you trying to accomplish? Are extra hours the best way to get there?
- **What are the negative consequences** of working more? We all need to burn the midnight oil sometimes, but making it a habit can be harmful. People who are well rested tend to perform

better, so there's a point at which working extra hours can hurt your performance rather than enhance it.

Have a vision for the way you want the boundaries between work and home to be drawn. Use that vision to guide how you manage your life and your time.

## 4. Get Support.

Having a support network can help you achieve your goals. Family members, friends, colleagues, and mentors may be able to help you manage your time and energy. They can empathize and provide encouragement as you begin to adjust the balance between your work and personal life. When they understand what you're trying to do, they can better advise and support you. And who knows, they may even volunteer to take some tasks off your plate!

## 5. Track Your Progress.

Making life changes requires focus and commitment. To help you stay on track, make a plan and monitor your progress. Become accountable to yourself and your work-life stakeholders. Experimenting with different tactics and taking time to reflect on their impact will help you see more clearly what works for you and where the pitfalls are.

## Living a Successful Life

Living your life in a way that feeds your soul is ultimately about control. You need to exercise leadership in your own life.

The possibilities of what success looks like are endless — with no right or wrong way forward. Stay true to yourself. Determine what you want your life to look like, and work toward making it happen.

That's the approach taken by Elizabeth, a 38-year-old who thought she was too young to be burned out. She had worked her way up through the ranks to lead a nonprofit school serving special needs children. It wasn't a *job* to her. The school was her life.

Many days, she would arrive at five or six in the morning, well before other staff and teachers, and often stay into the evening. Weekends involved school functions, and Elizabeth was invariably present — the hands-on leader with her team. She knew the importance of being a constant presence and “face” of the institution. It was a role that called for her to be always “on.”

Active in her community, she volunteered, served on local boards of directors, and represented the school in many public functions. She was recognized and respected as a rising young leader.

This pace had begun when Elizabeth was 32 and appointed director of the school. At age 35, she had the first of two children and continued to work. At 38, she found herself physically exhausted, emotionally drained, and concerned about her health. After much deliberation, she asked her board of directors for a sabbatical and was granted a four-month leave.


She used the time to rest and recharge, reconnect with friends and family, and immerse herself in activities that restored her energy and creativity. Ultimately, she discovered her health issues were largely stress induced.

Elizabeth now cites her professional pause as a turning point in her career. She feared she had “become the role” — intensely work-focused for so long that she had lost herself to it. The time

“Talk to family members and coworkers about how you'll set priorities.”

off helped her focus on herself as a whole and creative individual, spouse, and parent.

Elizabeth returned to her job committed to sustainable new practices. While on sabbatical, she discovered the true depth and talent of her leadership team. She found the organization wasn't exclusively dependent upon her, and that a shared leadership approach could yield a more empowered, effective team. Over the last year, she's transitioned to sharing responsibilities, operating at a more reasonable pace, and adjusting her demanding expectations of herself.

She's found herself more comfortable (and successful) at interweaving work and family in her day, rather than always leading with work. She's managing boundaries, especially as they relate to evenings and weekends. And she's created her own personal board of directors — a small, select group of professional colleagues who support and champion her and hold her accountable to her new practices. She has become a role model for managing work and family roles successfully. 

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## Bypassing Burnout

Keep your life and organization in balance with these articles from *Nonprofit World* (NonprofitWorld.org/members):

**Free Yourself by Sharing Leadership Duties** (Vol. 29, No. 5)

**A Three-Step Approach to Managing Workplace Stress** (Vol. 22, No. 1)

**Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow** (Vol. 23, No. 5)

**Vacation Time: More than an Administrative Matter** (Vol. 24, No. 2)

**The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes for the Stressed-Out, Productivity-Challenged Workplace** (Vol. 28, No. 4)

**Planning to Succeed: Creating a Succession Plan** (Vol. 29, No. 3)

**The High Cost of Employee Turnover — and How to Avoid It** (Vol. 31, No. 3)

“What would a more sustainable version of your life look like?”

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