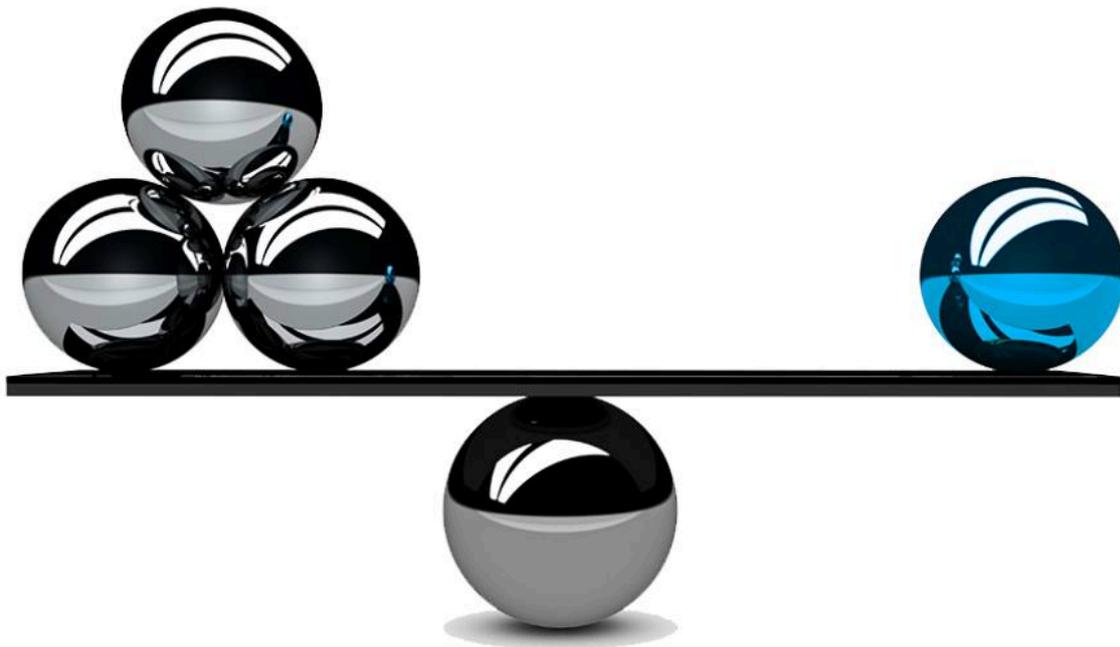


Balance starts at the top

As the boundaries between our personal and professional lives continue to blur, what can we do to achieve better balance? Research by Mireia Las Heras et al. suggests some practical things that organizations can do to facilitate work and home engagement.



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Creating workplaces that allow people to balance their personal and professional lives is good for a variety of reasons. It's responding to reality: people have family responsibilities, whether caring for young children or elderly parents, and giving them the flexibility they need to carry out those responsibilities helps them feel more in control of their lives, more positive and more energized. And research shows that this translates into greater

commitment, engagement and motivation at work. It's also shown to attract and retain talent.

Yet, as vital as balance is for today's workers, achieving it has gotten much harder in our constantly connected, globalized societies where we work across multiple time zones and everyone expects an instant response. For all of technology's advantages, it is also one of the chief culprits in keeping us from fully engaging with our non-work pursuits and responsibilities as much as we'd like or need.

While we can't simply eliminate all demands and pressures, we can at least foster organizational cultures that favor work-life balance.

Balance starts at the top, trickling down to employees. This is according to [Mireia Las Heras](#), professor of Managing People in Organizations and research director of the International Center for Work and Family (ICWF) at IESE, based on research she carried out with colleagues in the understudied context of Chile.

Given this finding, it's worth asking: how well do your company's leaders demonstrate their own commitment to work-life balance? Are they as enthusiastic about personal or family engagements as they are about work ones?

The crossover effect

The supervisor's level of non-work engagement has an important "crossover" effect: as employees perceive it, they come to view balance in a positive light and seek to emulate those behaviors for themselves. Leaders who are able to disconnect outside of work make it easier for others to do so, too.

Chile, classified as a hierarchical market economy, seemed a suitable context for the authors to study how well-being in work and home domains trickles down from supervisors to subordinates. While other studies have explored this dynamic at the peer-to-peer level, the authors found that those at the top of the organizational hierarchy — supervisors — played a special role in making it cascade throughout the organization.

Those supervisors who engaged more at work saw how their subordinates performed better at work; likewise, those supervisors who engaged more at home had subordinates who enjoyed more satisfaction at home. The authors differentiate this "crossover" effect from "spillover," whereby the actions in one domain (work) might have unintended consequences on the other (home).

It's worth remembering that this effect can be for good or ill. When supervisors don't have good work-life balance themselves, their subordinates will also perceive this and presume that home engagements are not organizational priorities. Supervisor behavior regarding family balance might have a much bigger impact than any written policy. That's why leaders should strive to set a good example, Las Heras insists.

Beyond being a role model

Yet, as important as role-modeling is, it helps if your organization already has the right policies in place, so that your behavior is validating and reinforcing, rather than fighting against, your corporate culture.

In this, HR plays a key role. The authors recommend the following actions:

- running workshops with supervisors to train, educate and increase awareness of family-supportive behavior.
- assessing employees' needs for being able to balance their work requirements with their personal circumstances.
- providing self-assessment tools for employees to monitor their own performance in work and home domains.
- using behavioral modeling techniques, such as role-playing, to practice the behaviors you seek.

Another tool — [discussed in different research by Las Heras](#) — is to allow "idiosyncratic deals" or "i-deals," which are personalized arrangements specific to the work-life needs and preferences of the individual employee. I-deals generally boost employee satisfaction and reduce turnover intentions. Again, supervisors who enjoy i-deals are more likely to extend them to their teams, and subordinates are more likely to take them up if they see their supervisors using them positively.

Remember, as a leader, you must have work-life balance not only for your own good but for the good of those you lead and the organization as a whole.

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