

Over-commitment, Stress and Professionalism: What to Do to Achieve Better Work-Life Balance

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A timely issue. In the last month I've been asked to speak to three Bar organizations on the subject of work-life balance. As a recovering overachiever, I've thought a great deal about the subject and have worked hard to overcome both the Imposter Syndrome and the Superachiever Syndrome. For those who are unfamiliar, sufferers of these so-called "syndromes" constantly feel "fake" and unqualified for the work they're doing and continuously push themselves to do more because they equate doing and being busy with self-worth. They say they worry about what others think of them, but the real issue is about why they feel so bad about themselves.

For some, the self-judgment of "good enough" remains elusive throughout the working life, which leads, not surprisingly, to high stress, chronically low self-esteem, poor work performance and low life satisfaction. I have yet to find perfect work-life balance: fortunately, though, it is possible to recover from both the Imposter Syndrome and the Superachiever Syndrome through awareness, hard work and patience with yourself.

The story of Lawyer X. A fellow lawyer has given me permission to share this true story with you. Lawyer X is intelligent, competent, and usually very reliable. However, X recently committed to a speaking engagement for a professional organization despite already being under a fair amount of stress from personal, family, work-related and volunteer activities. Unaware of the personal toll the stress was taking, X calendared the event incorrectly and procrastinated on researching the relevant issues. At the appointed time, the event happened – but without X present. In learning of the mistake after the fact, X was embarrassed and remorseful - and with good reason - but X learned a valuable life lesson, realizing that the problem could have been avoided had awareness of the pressures from existing commitments been greater and the obligation not been undertaken in the first place. X resolved to begin being mindful of the messages the body sends when under stress, eliminating or reducing unnecessary commitments and learning to re-evaluate priorities. With effort, X's life is slowly getting back in balance.

Getting back on track. Perhaps you can see some of yourself in X or can recall a time when you over-committed and what happened. Fortunately, most of us don't have to veer very far off course before we realize the need to get back on track. Avoiding over-commitment and moving towards work-life balance is difficult, especially for those just starting out and trying to grow a practice - but it can be done, once we understand why we may take on more than we can handle and develop strategies to help us decide what we reasonably can, want to and should undertake.

People often over-commit because they:

- Are enthusiastic about a variety of interesting projects and possibilities
- Underestimate the amount of time and effort a project will involve

- Overestimate their ability to multitask (hint: research in neuroscience suggests that our brains were not intended for multitasking!)
- Feel guilty about saying “no”
- Are continually driven forward by deficit thinking (e.g. “I’m not good enough”, “I haven’t done enough yet”), or magical thinking (“Once I accomplish X, I will feel good about myself”)
- Are accomplishment-driven and define themselves in terms of meeting goals, rather than being in the process
- Believe no one will do as good a job as they will
- Feel as though they have something to prove to the world
- Have difficulty prioritizing their commitments because they haven’t evaluated how meeting these obligations will help fulfill their life purpose

To help clarify your priorities, avoid over-commitment and enhance work-life balance, try these steps.

- Write mission and vision statements for your life. What are you here for? What do you want to be remembered for at the end of your career by the people who matter?
- Decide what you value, then ask yourself whether and how what you are about to take on advances those values.
- Establish a hierarchy by which to rank your existing and planned commitments. Categories could include Mandatory, Necessary, Highly Advisable, Desirable, Interesting and Fun (hint - some fun is essential for balance!). It’s good to have a mix from all categories, but when push comes to shove and you’ve run out of steam, go from top to bottom and defer what is deemed unessential.
- Realize you are not indispensable. Someone else with a similar skill set - and perhaps more time - can probably do as good a job as you can.
- Back out gracefully as soon as you realize you’ve overcommitted. You’ll save face and can be more easily replaced.
- If you’re consistently demanding too much of yourself, find out what core beliefs are driving you. Consider counseling to get to the root of the problem, help develop a more realistic self-appraisal and establish more effective skills to cope with feelings of self-doubt.

Life lessons. It’s often said that life teaches us lessons, and that what we don’t learn the first time around will come to us again and again until we “get it”. My friend X has encountered the Over-commitment Lesson before, but keeps working at it. You too can learn to recognize your true priorities, set reasonable expectations for yourself and keep what you do in line with what you say you value. In turn, your stress level will become more manageable, you’ll feel more balanced, and your conduct will be more professional.

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