

## Managing Your Career and Your Personal Life: Is There Light at the End of the Tunnel?

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### Abstract

There is no single answer to this age-old question, but one answer is “yes, if balance in life is achieved”. Everyone who experiences the rush of the tenure years hopes that life after tenure will be more reasonable after the first measure of success has passed. But, success breeds success, and the natural desire to be successful often becomes the driving function that leads to more success. A career filled with hundreds of publications and no relationships often leaves life unfulfilled. Our lives need balance, and each of us must determine what balance works. In their book, *Teaching Engineering*, Wankat and Oreovicz<sup>1</sup> discuss personal management. In chapter two they include stress and personal health as important considerations for those in academe. They discuss efficiency in research and teaching as ways to allow for more free time. It is important to the reader that an early chapter is dedicated to the issue of balance. Yes, there must be balance in our lives. This paper discusses the things that need to be balanced along with the distractions that lead to imbalance. It discusses goal setting and planning as the best ways to keep the balance, since it is balance that allows for success in both career and personal life.

### Balance

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. Covey urges professionals not to neglect important personal areas such as health, family, professional preparation, or personal development. He argues that the price of success should never be a broken marriage, ruined health or weakness in personal character. This level of sacrifice far exceeds the payoff in the long run. Efficient use of time and the development of a balanced way of life can reduce this level of sacrifice.

One must try to obtain balance and at times, take time to renew the one's natural balance. Each of us has a "Fire Within"<sup>3</sup> that drives us to greater achievement. Each of us wants to leave a legacy; some "proof" that we existed and that we did well. The desire to create the legacy is driven by the "Fire Within"; but balance in our lives must be maintained so that the fire continuously burns. The four dimensions of personal renewal include the physical, the mental, the social/emotional and the spiritual. The time required to renew each dimension often succumbs to the demands of the profession and individual weakness; renewal is not accomplished. Unless balance is achieved, the natural way of things is disorder and disorder leads to inefficiency in every aspect of life.

### Distractions from Achieving Balance

This is the easy part to identify because many professors find reasons not to do the things that are included in renewal. There is research to complete. There is a paper that must be written, or a book that has been promised. There is the heavy teaching load and the problems associated with dealing with students. There are committees, foundations, and community groups all wanting

part of the valuable time in each day. There are family, friends, associates, and others who demand attention. And, of course the big distraction from achieving balance in the early professional years of a college professor is tenure.

Tenure is the all-encompassing rush to the rest of one's life; the six-year sprint to the end of the marathon. Tenure is literally the most efficient path to job security, but at what cost? Tenure-stream professors spend an enormous amount of time "interning" in the teaching profession. Expectations during the tenure years include large grants, exceptional teaching, numerous publications in the most prestigious journals, supervision of graduate students, and service at the local and national level. For six years it is expected that super heroes do exist and that they are part of the local faculty. The distraction of tenure is its centrality during these six years. It becomes the focus of life, perhaps an obsession for many, that overwhelms some new professors. Achieving tenure is wonderful, but for those not so lucky, the tenure process becomes a devastating part of life: a major distraction to achieving balance.

Second only to tenure, as a distraction to achieving balance, is the computer. The compulsion to immediately answer e-mail, to be current on all the newest software, and to use the computer to continually refine everything until it is perfect wastes a lot of time. The computer becomes the master rather than the tool. Functions that were once handled by staff become normal in the everyday lives of college professors. Much time is spent in front of the screen, not all of it efficiently. The lost time becomes a distraction, since time is an essential ingredient to achieving balance.

There are many other distractions that affect productivity and life in general. Relationships that suffer during high productivity times often result in lower production later on. Increased productivity requires increased travel to conferences and meetings and results in increased stress. Not being the super hero that was expected leads to moderate success in any of the big three tenure areas of teaching, research and scholarship is a distraction from achieving balance. Finally, being a volunteer, or "yes" person, leads to innumerable distractions.

### The Tunnel

Light at the end of the tunnel indicates that after tenure there is a magic infusion of time, reduced requirements, and simply less to do... possible, but not probable for most professors. Those that are at the top of their game after tenure often continue to produce at the same rate for years. Senior professors, with 700 peer-reviewed articles in 30 years of teaching have been busy. Granted, much of this comes from the graduate students working for those professors; but much is still required of those professors to make graduate students successful. Others write books, or start companies, or become engaged in administrative duties, and yet others find themselves trying to do all three. Some professors are incredibly successful in balancing all their professional ambitions with their other personal needs. Some do the balancing poorly. It is the latter group that needs to renew or develop a better way of managing time.

### Goal Setting

Wankat<sup>1</sup> emphasized goal setting as a good way of making a career plan and receiving immediate gratification for short-term results. Goal setting can be career defining, or goal setting can determine what is to be accomplished today. Goal setting should be balanced since this will keep the focus on the need to renew. Goals should be developed for the long-term with intermediate goals being developed for the year or academic term. Once goals are set, then priorities need to be established.

Priorities are established to ensure that something gets accomplished. If a goal is to run a marathon next spring, then there is no reason to over train in the summer. While training is necessary during the entire year, accommodation for the long hours of training later should be made now; and important goals that were to be accomplished in the spring might suddenly move to the top of the priority list now. In the academic arena, that paper that must be presented next year probably needs to be started now since there is a shortage of data. While this seems trivial, establishing priorities is poorly done by many people. Setting priorities early puts things in order, removes stress in the short term and keeps the stress level low since crisis situations are avoided.

The term efficiency comes to mind and is often misunderstood when applied in university settings. It is important that all professors, especially those in the tenure stream, recognize the importance of efficiency in teaching, as well as research, as they pass through the tunnel. Efficient preparation of classroom instruction leads to better student/teacher relations, makes the professor feel better, and provides much needed time for the myriad of tasks that must be accomplished. Efficiency in research, meetings, coffee breaks, and every aspect of the day is necessary. Efficient work habits make the day seem like it has 26 hours, a situation that is the dream of many scholars. Efficiency, once in place, can have a positive effect on one's personal life in the same way as it will in the office. Efficiency, like priorities, helps to remove stress.

There are several ways to relieve stress, all of which relate to relaxation. Relaxation is not necessarily sleep, rather it is the escape from the stressors. Recently, many have turned to exercise such as running, jogging, walking or tennis; but the choice must be a wise one. Health screening is important and taking up golf may not be as relaxing as it appears. Regularly scheduled activities on the weekend outside the office can be very beneficial. There are those who feel that clearing things off the desk helps with stress relief; they use the weekends to catch up. There is a danger with weekend office work: creation of additional ideas and work. When working on the weekend there should be a definite priority, and a goal. Once these are accomplished, it is time to relax.

Movement of the focus from goal setting and efficiency to relaxation to achieve balance may seem arbitrary but the two are connected. If long-term goals include personal health and some form of long-term relationships with others, then relaxation is important. Looking back, renewal includes physical and mental aspects that are important considerations in keeping the fire burning to provide the energy necessary for continued success.

## Reality

All of this is well and good but it does not answer the question: Is there light at the end of the tunnel? The answer is maybe. In time, the important consideration is the attainment of balance, even if there is much to do. Hard work can become a way of life and is not necessarily destructive. Some people find relaxation in writing books; others in discovering new ways of building that better mousetrap. It is difficult to explain how every person deals with stress and relaxation. Some people work best under the pressure of a deadline and multi-process to keep deadlines in their future. These people are setting goals and priorities and use the deadlines to get things done. When do they relax? The best answer might be... in between events. The caution for these people is to be careful in scheduling additional items between major events, as this is likely to clog the system and cause the stress level to rise precipitously.

Others need a fixed schedule with planning time, room for thought, time for execution, and time to review and reflect. These people set a different series of goals and priorities and deal with stress in a far different manner. Their stress may not be as high, but it may be constant, as their schedule requires certain accomplishments at certain times to ensure success. Wankat<sup>1</sup>

postulates that research and creativity may not fit this mold since they are “messy” and inherently inefficient. This can be a stressor for those who are ordered by nature. Thus, they may deal with stress by addition of more order, thus eliminating inefficiency as often as possible.

### Concluding Remarks

Is there light at the end of the tunnel? Yes, but reaching the end requires a balanced approach to life. It is important to set and meet goals. Rewards are excellent for self-esteem and are usually associated with the meeting of goals. There are other considerations that must enter into the process of meeting goals and seeking rewards. Remember that 700 publications will not replace failed health. There are human needs that need attending; ones that cannot wait. Of course, all of this is personal and each professor is the best monitor of personal stress and health. Back to the original question about the tunnel; yes, there is light at the end. The problem is the length of time spent inside the tunnel; that is up to the individual professor.

### References

1. Wankat, P.C., and Oreovicz, F.S., *Teaching Engineering*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1993.
2. Covey, S.R., *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989.
3. Covey, S.R., Merrill, A.R., and Merrill, R.R., *First Things First*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994.

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