



## Setting Work-Life Balance in the Age of COVID-19

A C-suite executive was facing a problem that is not unusual in the current COVID-19, stay-at-home workplace. To keep his five children on a regular learning schedule, he and his wife agreed to provide them with homeschooling at the same time each day. His challenge: how to balance the demand of being a key player on an international team with new daddy responsibilities on the homefront.

It's a significant issue. Bloomberg estimates that sheltering in place has added an average of three hours daily to the American workweek. And not surprisingly, a recent survey found that 45 percent of workers reported burnout. In the "electronic cottage" we now inhabit, earning a living and living your life is not as cleanly defined as it once was. The temptation is just too great to respond immediately to a computer ping, take a late-night phone call, or provide input at an odd hour to a project.

This makes the issue of accountability and boundary setting very tricky: How do you balance your work life with your domestic responsibilities, without lowering performance expectations, and without pretending that it's business as usual? Child rearing, nightmarish shopping for the basics, caring for a sick significant other, keeping in touch with edgy loved ones—you name it—are task interferers that make it especially challenging to keep workplace commitments. COVID-19 has blurred the old work-life delineation.

That said, during this pandemic the definition of accountability is the same as it was before it struck and will be the same after it ends: *doing what you say you will do—no stories, no excuses*. If necessary, you need to renegotiate up front which expectations you can and cannot meet and then deliver what you have promised. Your word must remain golden. That's the high-performance way.

But today, renegotiating what you are able to deliver is more difficult than ever, given all the obstacles, especially on the home front. This is not the time to pretend or hide out. Be honest and let your team leader and fellow team members know the constraints under which you are operating.

Everyone in the organization must recognize that we are all operating with less bandwidth than previously. Time, focus, office support, and levels of concentration are not what they were pre-COVID-19.

*What's different about accountability in today's workplace is not lowered performance expectations but having in place clear boundaries that will enable you to deliver against those expectations, given COVID-19 constraints.*

There is no calculus that can strike the perfect balance to enable leaders and their teams to render unto the workplace—and the homespace—the things that each deserves. But there are six best-practice actions to take in order to maintain the right work-life balance while keeping everyone accountable for results.

*1. Expand what accountability means*—High-performance players are accountable for results, beginning with their own and those of the individuals reporting to them. They must also hold accountable other key stakeholders, including colleagues on their team, the team leader, and the organization itself. No change here! But, given COVID-19, accountability goes beyond performance *per se* to include accountability for your team's well-being and resilience to ensure that they continue to function at their peak. And each of us has a new, higher-level accountability to do our part for the safety of our community.

*2. Be empathetic*—Put yourself in your colleagues' shoes and imagine what challenges they are facing at this time.

*3. Be honest*—Let your colleagues know in advance the constraints under which you are operating. Some venting is human, but better to keep focused on solutions and renegotiating boundaries.

*4. Remain flexible*—Be open to renegotiating deliverables but keep true to high-performance standards.

*5. Keep focused*—Make priority setting a continuous process. Concentrate on the critical wins, then move on to the "nice to haves."

*6. Take the temperature*—Conduct routine team check-ins: How's it going? How is everyone doing regarding work-life balance? Is there anything you need to modify to keep up performance?

Keep in mind these six actions taken by high-performing leaders and teams, and you'll find it easier to resolve the tricky accountability/work-life issues brought on by COVID-19. And you'll also find it easier to successfully thread your way through these "business unusual" times in which we live and work.

Best Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Howard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.