Leading a Full Life: Reflections on Several Decades of Work, Family, and Accomplishment

Shirley K. Baker, Vice Chancellor for Scholarly Resources and Dean of University Libraries, Washington University in St. Louis (retired June 2012)

Author’s note: Encouraged by friends and family, I am writing a book on leadership. A critical section of my draft is a reflection on work/life balance. This article is drawn from that section. To read drafts of additional stories from the book, visit my blog at http://www.shirleykbaker.com.

Neither my husband nor I ever wanted a life that was all work; neither wanted to marry a person who worked billable hours. Each of us loves many things—reading, dancing, and family and friends. We wanted all of those in our lives. We agreed that each of us wanted rewarding work; neither wanted to give up career goals for the sake of the other. Compromise, yes; give up, no. We developed a rough “your move/my move” strategy that took us through half a dozen job changes while moving each of us forward in our careers. Sometimes it meant moving across town, sometimes across the country. Each of us has left a job we loved for the benefit of the other.

Each of us did manage to excel in a career. And we have friends and children. It was not easy, especially when the children were young. But our children are now interesting, balanced adults and my husband and I are still married and happy more often than not. We worked hard at balance.

We paid close attention to time management. Taking on more responsibility at home or work meant being even more cognizant of managing our time. Here are some strategies that worked for us to get our work done and have lives outside work.

Managing Work Life

Choose carefully what you do yourself. For me an important insight was that I should do first what only I could do. If I could delegate the task, I did. To do this, I had to learn to share up front what was important to me in the final outcome. Then I could leave the how up to the staff member. In my first weeks as dean I was talking with the associate dean whose position was the one I had held at MIT. I was about to tell him exactly how I wanted something done, when I realized how badly I react to such detailed instruction. So I backed off and told him what I considered important—the rest was up to him.

One has to assume that most delegation will turn out well. To guarantee that, do give feedback on action taken—either confirming success or providing positive guidance on improving. Good staff are quick learners. And they respond to increasing and interesting responsibility.

Fight your urge to control. By delegating, you give up control of details and you generate more results. Leaders who insist on paying close attention to details don’t accomplish as much as they could. In lower-level positions, you might have had time and sufficient knowledge to control most processes. As a dean or
director, you don’t. Instead, express often and publicly what is important to you. Staff will hear and act accordingly.

**Fund-raising.** The first I heard from university development staff was how formidable I would appear to donors. Most donors were once college students and they remember “the dean” as a remote and powerful figure. You, of course, know that it is just you behind that title. Recognizing your power in the relationship makes it easier to be at ease and to be oneself. Being less pompous than expected is wonderfully disarming. You still have the power; you don’t need to flaunt it.

While fund-raising is chief among tasks you can’t delegate, you still do not have to go it alone. Enlist lieutenants. Establish a development group. Staff the group with your fund-raiser (even if he or she doesn’t report to you), an events and publications person, the senior person who oversees collections, and the head of special collections. I include a rotating position in this group for a department head, coordinator, or other up-and-coming professional. If any of these people ends up as a director, he or she will have had a year of exposure to the nuts and bolts of fund-raising. This group meets regularly without me to sort through things that don’t need my immediate involvement. My time is reserved for broad directions, personal insights, asks, and high-level stewardship. And, often one or more of these staff acts as my emissary—taking donors to lunch and other everyday stewardship. Every member of the group knows the library’s goals and dreams and has learned how to court, encourage, and steward donors.

**Use Your Own Time Well.** A desire to respect other people’s time can help you manage your own. Being on time for meetings and expecting others to do so is essential. Having a plan for what you want to accomplish in the meeting and sticking to it helps. Choose the right length of meeting for the topic, quietly monitor progress during the meeting, and end on time. Many people who work long hours do so because they are unable to manage this unobtrusive control or they get far more deeply “into the weeds” than is appropriate for a leader.

Making lists also helps you manage your time. Make those lists and evaluate the priority of each task so that you don’t overlook a high priority while focusing on the immaterial challenge of the moment. With the list in front of you (I keep mine center-rear on my desk), it is easier to avoid getting caught up in the e-mail or text of the moment. Checking off items you’ve done gives you a sense of accomplishment. Save those lists for drafting self-evaluations or writing annual reports.

**Focus initial energies and attention on people who will help you succeed.** When you come into a new position, 20% of your new staff will support you whatever you do, a few will oppose you whatever you do, and the rest will watch to see who prevails. Focus your initial efforts on the 20% and address the resisters later. In time, you may create a tsunami that sweeps resisters along. Or makes them stand out in bold relief. That is the time to take them on.

**Know your people.** Recently at a staff party I was talking with several long-term employees. One mentioned coming to my office when I first arrived more than two decades ago. The second said, “Yes, I remember my meeting, too. You asked me if there was anything I needed. I told you I needed my own computer. And, I got one.”
The meetings were part of my process of getting to know my 140 staff. In my early weeks, I scheduled a meeting with each—top to bottom, six to eight a week. Twenty minutes for support staff was enough to accomplish my aims but not so long as to terrify them. Thirty to forty-five minutes for mid-level staff or higher gave me a chance to get to know them. Mostly I asked the staff to tell me about themselves. “What brought you to the University and the Libraries? What do you like doing? What do you wish were different? What advice might you have for me?” And, I continue to do this for new staff at all levels within the first two months of their employment.

Be open, personal, and humane with your staff. Share things you learned and mistakes you made. Have an open door but make sure that those who want to see you with a problem have tried to resolve it with their own supervisor first. I learned as an associate director that I shouldn’t be too easily approachable by everyone. Word of what you will and will not do, what you like and dislike, passes around the library quickly. I prefer not to be called at home if the item can wait until I am back in the office. I don’t spend my workday calling home and I prefer that my home days are not made into workdays. If you have delegated well, people will not be calling you at home unless it is really you they need.

**Occasionally go shopping for a hat.** In the 1980s, when my children were young and I had a challenging job and a long commute, I occasionally took a day just for myself. Once I went into Boston and shopped for hats. I love women's hats (I should have been a minor British royal). I spent hours trying on hats. I didn’t buy any, but that didn’t matter. I went home restored and refreshed. Do things like this for yourself, in addition to what you do for your job and your family. Make even small amounts of time for reading, exercise, or hat shopping. Consider it mental-health time, when you do nothing but exactly what you want. And do take your vacation; you occasionally need extended away time.

Back at work, don’t be the last person to leave the office. Your work life already includes evening and weekend events and travel. So it is important that you keep your time in the office within reasonable bounds. You will work more anyway—just not in the office. You will work in the shower, as you dress, after your children go to bed, and when you can’t sleep. If you can’t sleep, get up, write down your thoughts, and go back to bed. Having a partner who sleeps soundly is useful.

**Travel**

There are many positive things about traveling. Seeing your trusted colleagues from other institutions gives you a chance to compare notes on being a leader—and learn from your friends or teach them something you’ve learned. These people over time become your close friends. Long airplane flights are excellent for reading the materials for the upcoming event and for getting through the piles of articles and newsletters piling up on the corner of your desk. It is amazing how fast you can consume and discard these on a trip. But also consider rewarding yourself on the return flight with reading for pleasure (if you haven’t fallen asleep from exhaustion before the plane even takes off).

Travelling for professional meetings or development is a leadership responsibility. But logistics are not; minimize them. Make your travel preferences known to your assistant—window or aisle seat,
chain hotel or boutique, etc.—and let him or her handle the details. For what you must do for yourself—

packing, unpacking—make lists and follow them. Make a master list of everything you need to pack
(summer, winter, vacation, work) and print copies. Cross off things as you pack.

My family once left for a weekend at the beach with the crazy amount of luggage such an event
requires. We had the toys, the picnic supplies, the bag of swimwear... It was only at bedtime that we
realized the single suitcase with our clothes was inside the front door back in Lexington. Since then,
whenever we leave home for any kind of trip, we count the number of items we are carrying—bags, coats,
hats, teddy bears—and count them again at every stop.

And for work travel, create a cache of the chargers, toiletries, cosmetics, and medications you always
bring and transfer them to whatever suitcase you are carrying (my kit includes a corkscrew and a
magnifying mirror). When you get home from a trip, replenish those items that are running low as you
unpack (and do unpack and put your suitcase away before you go to bed). Then you will face the next day
back at work with minimum chaos back home.

**Making Your Home Life Rich and Calm**

Managing your home life well maximizes family time and gives you the peace of mind to focus on work
when you are there. The quality of your relationships with those important to you is critical to your
mental health. By carefully organizing the **mundane activities** in your home life, you enable calm and
refreshing hours of family interaction. You don’t want to be distracted from your family by disorganized
hustling to feed, clothe, and house them. Managing drudgery requires discipline (but then, all success
requires discipline).

For grocery shopping, make a list of all the things you often buy in the order that they are shelved
in your supermarket; print copies. Aisle numbers help. (This does require one trip through your
supermarket with a clipboard—hoping you don’t meet anyone you know. I ran into the chancellor’s wife
the last time I did this.) Keep a copy of the list on your refrigerator and circle or write in items as you
discover you need them. (Our son convinced his wife that creating such a shopping list was worth the
initial effort! They now spend 20 minutes in the supermarket rather than the hour they used to spend.)
Make menus and shop for groceries once a week, using your pre-printed shopping list as the guide. Post
the menus—with recipe page numbers—on the refrigerator. Therefore, whoever is cooking knows what to
defrost and what to make. He or she can switch menus around so as to cook their favorites (my husband
does stir-fry, I do fish).

Wash the dishes and clean the kitchen before bed every night (another habit copied by both our
children). Coming into a clean kitchen in the morning has a calming effect for all. So does doing laundry
and ironing once a week; you can start Monday with all clothes in their closets or drawers, ready to wear
(this is a boon for traveling, too). Encourage every able-bodied person in your household who eats food
and wears clothes to share kitchen and laundry duty.

You can maximize your time if you shop for major clothes purchases for yourself and your
dependents twice a year—spring and fall. This works well when children are young but less well as they
grow up. Shop online whenever possible. Hire help—housecleaners, caterers for entertaining, window
washers, painters, lawn-care people.
Children

Children bring richness to life as well as notable effort. Luckily, children thrive on routine. If you can retain order and predictability in your life, your children will respond well. And partners need to really share the joys, sorrows, and effort of parenting. It helps to negotiate this before you have children. Sharing responsibility for children is easier without stereotypes about who does what. Dads can go on field trips or make cookies, but so can moms or grandparents. In dividing up responsibilities, find a way to accommodate individual parent limitations; some can handle unscheduled emergencies, others can do anything that can be put on a calendar ahead of time. And you can reduce your own anxiety about balancing parenting and work by letting your own supervisor know the flexibility you need.

Luck has a lot to do with managing family and work. Serious illnesses or disabilities make balancing work life with family life much more difficult. But, barring such exigencies, there are many ways you can ease the stress of family life. They all require discipline. Set limits—on e-mail, TV, junk food, computer games, and bedtimes—for the children and yourself. Our children sometimes pushed against these restraints, but now that they are grown up, they claim the limits contributed to their own success in life!

We always tried to sit down and eat dinner together every evening; you can get a simple home-cooked meal on the table in 25 minutes (half an hour of children’s TV works wonders while you cook). And cooking simple meals (the only thing that most young children like) limits relying on unhealthful take-out and fast food. You’ll probably eat a lot of broiled chicken, rice, and microwaved vegetables in the early years. But you and your partner can have some quality time in the kitchen while the children are otherwise engaged. Do work in some treats—wine at dinner for grown-ups, desserts and the occasional soda on weekends.

Good child care is critical. If you are in a responsible position you are more able than many to pay for good child care and elementary school “extended day” programs. When you move to a new town, tell your realtor to look for these as part of your house-hunting process. After we asked a realtor to do this for us, the firm began highlighting that as a distinctive service they provided. If you work year-round you will need to find good summer camps—day camps for young ones and sleepover camps for older children. You may have to line these up early in the New Year, when you are still exhausted from the holidays, but the effort is worth it. When your children are old enough, encourage them to get summer jobs. Working a low-level job gives your child a sense of reality, generates respect for people who work these jobs year-round, and supplies pocket money.

When one of your children is old enough to babysit for those younger, cut some deals. Pay the older one for sitting and pay the younger a smaller amount (perhaps 25% of the older one’s rate) for being good. If things do not go well while you are out no one gets paid. It only happened once for us.

It is important to let your children be themselves. Avoid trying to relive your youth through them or force them to be what you might have wanted to be. Letting your children have some autonomy also gives them advantages. Children don’t need fully scheduled lives to grow up into good and resourceful adults. Try to avoid too many sports, music lessons, or other “enrichment” activities. Children need downtime as much as adults do. Do make sure your children know the importance of traits such as honesty, hard work, and caring for others. Given this basic guidance, a little “benign neglect” encourages stronger and more independent children.
Once the children are sentient, have weekly family meetings. We came up with this ploy when I took a class in child rearing, hoping to become a calmer and better parent. The recommended meeting agenda is to start with compliments from everyone; discuss school, work, and family plans for the week; hear grievances; and hand out allowances. Finish the meeting with a treat (cookies, a game, a short trip to the museum) chosen by the chair—a position which rotates weekly among all family members. Take minutes—rotated among those who can write; these special notebooks (or online files) become your family history.

Talk about your work at the dinner table. It reduces mystery about your absence. You can communicate that frustration or occasional failure is not fatal, and you can pass on interest and skills. And, you may learn something from the questions your children ask. As your children grow, you may be surprised and pleased to see them demonstrate the skills they picked up at your dinner table.

Looking back, my husband and I feel that we have mostly accomplished what we set out to do. We have had rewarding and useful careers and our children feel confident that they can also. It was not easy but we did it.

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