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Prof. Stewart Friedman: Invest more in your family and in yourself and be a better manager

The tendency to concentrate only on your work and to neglect all other aspects of your life is a problem for the modern manager. Prof. Stewart Friedman's research proves: if you invest more in your family and in yourself – your performance will also improve.

For several years Prof. Stewart Friedman of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania has been promoting the theory of Total Leadership. As opposed to the well-known field of work-life balance (WLB), Prof. Friedman claims that you should not only think in terms of life and work, rather it should be expanded to four domains: family, work, community (a rather weak aspect in Israel) and “me”.

Recently Prof. Friedman was hosted in The Marker's “Young and Promising” meeting, where he provided the findings of his multi-year research, and showed that better integration among the four domains leads to a major increase in managers' satisfaction – and most importantly in their performance. “I've been teaching for several years at Wharton” opened Friedman, “and I have seen how the world has changed as have my students' perceptions. For example in 1984, I asked students if they expect to work at same company for their entire career. Two-thirds of my students expected to start and end their careers in the same company.”

“The years have passed” continued Friedman “and recently, about 25 years after the original survey, I asked the same question. Out of about 70 MBA students only two replied that they expect to work in the same company and even these two were children of wealthy families who expected them to eventually take control of the family business. The change is only one of the many we have witnessed in the business world in the last two decades. In earlier times, only a few women worked outside of the home; today in the American workforce there are more women than men. Similarly, environmental perceptions have started taking root as people want to live in a greener, safer world. All those factors influence career perceptions.”

According to Friedman the digital revolution has caused shock. To prove how linked we are to technology; Friedman asked that the audience hand him over their cell phones for the duration of the lecture. No one volunteered. “When you have a device that constantly connects you to the world, you need to create boundaries and decide whether to turn it on or off” he said. “Managers in the past didn't have that problem, since they were simply inaccessible. It's not surprising that in this chaos many managers simply get lost. Leadership is no longer just business”, emphasized Friedman. “Leadership is a holistic view of life. Integrating all your non-work domains – will only benefit your career.”

Research shows: Less work, better performance

Senior managers move uncomfortably in their seats when hearing Friedman's theory, especially when he provides them with evidence of how unbalanced their life is, and encourages them to, yes, yes, work less.

During the lecture Friedman asked the audience to participate in an interesting exercise. Each participant received a test-yourself form (see table) to fill in the percentage of attention he devotes to each of the four domains. It's not easy to fill this form, as the numbers provide evidence to what we often try to ignore when it is not so graphically obvious. Work, of course, gets the most attention, the family at best maintains the same level as work, though usually less, community receives low percentages as does the self, both physically and mentally.

After the exercise, which also included sharing your results with a complete stranger, Friedman presented us with his findings which follows managers who undertook a four-month program to integrate the four domains of their lives and improve performance in all of them.

The data shows that while the perceived importance of each domain remains relatively steady, the focus changes quite dramatically – attention to work showed a decrease from 55% to 44%, yet satisfaction increased by 21%. And even more important, performance increased by 8%.

Other domains benefited as well. In the family attention increased from 23% to 28%, satisfaction increased by 27% and performance increased by 14%. Similar results were also noted in the community and the self domains. The conclusion: it's beneficial to put more attention in your non-work domains to increase satisfaction and most importantly your professional performance.

How is it done?

Friedman suggests several steps in creating change. Four months of work and review is needed to kick-start the process that will, in time, become routine.

Step 1: the dialog. "Often we feel that we have a good idea of what other peoples' expectations are of us, while in reality their expectations are in fact far lower", says Friedman, "so for years we are working at meeting high expectations that don't even exist, wasting our energy unnecessarily." The way to accurately know these expectations is to have an open and honest dialog with the people closest to you in each of the domains, among them your supervisors, colleagues, subordinates and of course partners or family members. During the conversations one main question needs to be asked: what exactly are your expectations of me?

“Most of the programs’ participants were surprised since they got answers they never imagined” says Friedman. “It is not unlikely that you will discover that you can put a lot less effort to meet expectations, and devote more time to other things.”

Step 2: Being completely focused, during these conversations and on all subsequent conversations – it is essential to learn to be wholly focused on what is being said. The need to be completely involved in the situation that you are in is a key part of the process. It is not an easy step but it is worth while to learn how to turn off cell phones during a conversation, and to block external interruptions such as a computer or a TV. Initially it will be done consciously. Later on it’ll come naturally.

Step 3: Set a goal for the next month. Through thinking and focusing on an achievable goal, we can start the journey by adhering to this goal for duration of the upcoming month. For example having a family diner once or even twice a week, joining a Yoga class or a gym, joining the PTA or volunteering for an hour a week.

“It’s about trial and error”, says Friedman. “There will be goals that you’ll achieve and some you won’t, but you shouldn’t stop trying, until you’ve achieved the right formula. You just need to understand that it’s all a part of the journey.”

Step 4: Changing your work habits. Schedule change is a big part of the process as is changes in work habits. You may find that working one day from home enhances your productivity. Delegating authority or changes in your role description may help as well. Seek the method that works best for you, providing you with more flexibility and more time to spend on things other than work.

“It’s not easy” agrees Friedman, “but it’s possible. Awareness, determination and continuous trail-and-error – these will a more whole person and a better leader”