

# The Balancing Act

John D. Beckett • Balancing Family & Work

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MAINTAINING BALANCE BETWEEN work and family is one of the most challenging tasks for a person in business.

This was driven home to me during a bittersweet discussion among twelve leaders of major U.S. companies with whom I recently met to forge a network for mutual strengthening and support.

We spent time highlighting the most pressing issues we face as Christians in business. Advertising policies, terminations, freedom to share one's faith, and working for an unscrupulous boss were all noted. But the most critical, by common consent, was the challenge of raising and relating to our children.

To the credit of these busy CEO's, home-related difficulties were set ahead of problems at work. But it was sobering to hear story after story of serious family upheaval. These were people who loved their children and would do anything for them. Yet there was so much alienation, so much tension expressed, that we could only wonder what could be done-how these problems could be resolved or avoided in the first place.

We candidly acknowledged that our success in business could never compensate if our families were falling apart. But we also knew there were no easy answers.

## Common Challenges

The conflicts we identified are replicated throughout corporate America, from executive suites to the plant floor and everywhere in between. The words of the prophet Malachi come to mind, the final passage in the Old Testament. He spoke of a day when the hearts of the fathers would be turned to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Every father and mother reading this book yearns for that day.

As parents of six children, Wendy and I have had major challenges in childrearing. There's a long list of things we would like to do over. We can empathize with the couple who had six theories about raising children-but no children. Later they were parents with six children-and no theories!

Yet we can say that God has been very faithful to us. We've been blessed with healthy family relationships, and, as our children grow older, their friendships with each other are actually strengthening. (We honestly wondered if it would ever happen!) We are grateful they have maintained high moral standards, taken their faith seriously, and established a good sense of direction in their personal and professional lives. In fact, I felt such appreciation for them following the business leaders' meeting mentioned earlier that I wrote each a letter, telling them how much their love and exemplary character has meant to Wendy and me.

## Focusing on the Family

But it's not easy to make our families a top priority. How *do* we as busy people in business achieve the balance-for ourselves and for our employees? I share a few thoughts with the sober reminder that these lessons come as much out of our failures as our successes. (Remember the six theories?)

*Acknowledge the family as foundational.* God sanctions three "institutions" in Scripture: family, the church and government. The church is comprised of families and will be only as sound and effective as the families within it. Governments are instituted to ensure liberty and security for both the family and the church.

Of the three, the family is primary and foundational. It was created by God, and we are set into families by God. It exists as a unit secured by love and is life's basic training ground. The promise to Abraham, the father of our faith, was that in him *all* the families of the earth would be blessed, and the results of that promise extend to us. There *is* a blessing which God wants to bestow on families!

*Affirm the priority of family over work.* Our priorities should be ordered like this: First, our relationship with God; then commitment to family; and only then commitment to our work and vocations. Placing our faith first will enable us to function in a godly way toward both our family and our work. But for many, this priority structure is reversed, and work takes precedence over faith and family. Most of us don't intend this to happen, but the tyranny of work overwhelms us. We neglect the home front and awaken to the grim reality that our families are adrift and rudderless in storm-tossed seas.

The choices we must make between work and family can be exceptionally difficult. The demands of work seem to be intensifying as companies "downsize" and increase expectations on those who remain. Unfettered pursuit of profits can blur other priorities. More and more, women are the family breadwinners or have to work to supplement their husbands' income and to make ends meet. If a family is under siege, achieving the time needed with spouses and children may require one or both parents to scale back hours at work or even change employment. The job that totally consumes us day in and day out can hardly be the right job.

*Maximize the value of the time spent with family.* Here are some specific ways we have found that our family can increase the quality of our relationships:

- Express love openly, and show responsible affection.
- Maintain a disciplined atmosphere, but balanced with good fun.
- Seek harmony between husband and wife-it fosters children's security.
- Work at communication. Be available when a family member needs to talk.
- Carve out regular one-on-one time with children, especially in larger families.
- Try to sit together at meals. Kindle wholesome mealtime conversations.
- Take vacations together. Centre activities around the children where possible.
- Go easy on time-consuming personal activities during child-rearing years. (I laid aside the golf clubs for two decades-and my handicap shows it!)
- Attend the children's school plays and concerts; visit with their teachers. Cheer your kids on at athletic events. It's impossible to overstate the

emotional effect on a child when the parents are on the sidelines at the soccer game-or are too busy to come.

- Limit TV. What you watch, watch together. Look for alternatives that are healthy and fun. When TV offers nothing worth watching in your family's time slot, choose a worthwhile video instead.
- Pray regularly-for the family and with the family.
- I'm absolutely convinced the common denominator and most essential element is quality time together. As an experiment, you might ask your children what they want most. My guess is they will say time with Mom and Dad.

### **Family-Oriented Approaches for Business**

Business leaders have the opportunity to foster and promote policies and practices that help produce healthy families. Often these are small things, not very costly, and always well received. Here are a few thoughts:

*Travel policies.* Limit the nights people who travel must be away. Don't insist, as some do, on travel over Saturdays to take advantage of reduced air fares.

*Maternity.* Make it easy for mothers to be at home with their newborn babies-the longer the better. Look for creative ways to make this possible.

*Open houses and company visits.* Invite children to come on a special day, and let parents show them where and with whom they work. Most young children have no idea about their parents' jobs; they simply see Mom or Dad disappearing and reappearing each day from that unpleasant thing called "work."

*Company newsletters mailed to the home.* Family-oriented content, including human interest stories, will build bridges between family and the workplace.

*Hiring family and relatives.* Yes, there are risks, but there are also rewards. Most of our experiences in hiring family have been positive. Maintain some safeguards, like not having family members report to each other.

Finding the right balance between work and family is the key, but admittedly it is not easy. Our nature is to press in one direction until we crash into a wall. Wisdom is to see the wall coming and adjust, bringing our lives into balance before it's too late.

### **Making the Choice**

In closing this chapter on balancing family and work, let me tell you about Ed. Ed worked in maintenance for a major auto manufacturer, where he typically put in seventy hours or more each week. You can imagine his income! I met Ed at a church function, and sometime later he phoned me.

"John," he said, "I need help. I'm in a job that's eating me alive. I'm making good money, but there's hardly time to enjoy it. The main problem is I simply don't have time with my wife and two sons, and I am starting to see the effects."

Generally, I'm reluctant to employ a person when it involves paying them less than they made at their previous job. In those cases, it's usually just a matter of time before they become discontented. But with Ed I was hearing a heart-cry. I saw

someone who was trying to bring his priorities into line with God's. He had counted the cost.

We hired Ed, and he has been a wonderful contributor to the company as well as a close friend. He once told me that wild horses couldn't drag him back to his other job, in spite of the greater income it offered.

For the first time he felt whole. His life was in balance.

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