



Values-based living for lawyers

Identifying and beginning to live your values will improve your work-life balance, before it becomes a problem.

BY CAMI MCLAREN

It is often with some surprise that young lawyers, fresh from law school, step into their first job and discover the amount of time required to be successful in this business. Whether it is because she works for a firm with a billable-hours requirement or because she is starting her own practice, it becomes quickly apparent that practicing law requires a great commitment of time. Different attorneys deal with this requirement in different ways. But inevitably the same thing occurs for the vast majority – time is taken from other, more personal, endeavors, such as family time, entertainment, “fun” time and down time.

Being out of balance

When combined with the inevitable pressures that seem to define the job – billable hours, client demands, partner or employer demands and the hallmark conflict that is the nature of the business – many attorneys find themselves feeling somewhat dissatisfied and often out-of-balance.

Obtaining balance

Some attorneys deal with this by ignoring it until they begin to wonder if they have made the right career choice. Others do nothing until something in



their personal life demands attention – a neglected spouse threatens to leave the relationship or a teenager starts to act out. There are many ways to improve work-life balance, before it becomes a problem. In this article, I will address just one fundamental way to begin to make choices that balance your work and your life. That is identifying and beginning to live your values.

Identifying your values

When I mention values, what comes to mind? Morals? Ethics? Are values something you have ever given thought to? I will start with a basic assertion: you have values that are uniquely yours even if you have never thought about them. You live your values every day. They are guiding you right now. The problem



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comes when we honor certain values and ignore others. This is when we start to feel out of balance, like something is not quite right; that no matter how hard we work things will never be how we want them to be. Your values are more than what you want; they are those principles you need to honor in order to be truly who you are and to feel fulfilled in your life.

Why take the time to discover your values? Very simply, being in alignment with your values – all of your values – will go a long way to creating a sense of balance in your life. Ignoring any of your values will cause stress, disease and frustration. As you discover what is truly important to you and begin to honor those things, you will experience a greater sense of well-being and fulfillment. So let's see what your values are.

Identifying your values

There are several ways to go about this. I will give you three. You may choose to do one of these exercises or all three to be sure you are clear what *your* values are.

- **Exercise One: Honoring your values**

Take some time to sit down and think about three different experiences in your life when you were very happy, truly fulfilled. You felt energized and alive. What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with? Write down the answers in some detail and then think about them. Ask yourself, what value was I living and honoring at that time? Whenever we feel happy, fulfilled or at peace, we are living our values.

There are hundreds of values. For example, if the time you recall being most fulfilled, you were skydiving, perhaps you value risk, courage, adventure. If the time you recall was being on vacation in the woods of the sequoias, it could be nature, solitude, peace, spirituality or something else. The point is, your values will represent whatever was important about the situation *to you*.

If you need help identifying your values, here are just a few examples: creativity, integrity, honesty, respect, fun, productivity, self-expression, service, kindness, spontaneity, spirituality, individuality, teamwork, courage, respect. The list goes on and on.

The question is, what is important to you at your core? Do not pick values from the list. Look into *your* life and uncover the values that are already there. This requires real-life examination and is not an intellectual process. Once you have created a list of five to ten values you recall living from this exercise, move on to the next exercise.

- **Exercise Two: Ignoring your values**

The second exercise is similar to the first. Think of three times in your life when you were dissatisfied – angry, frustrated or upset. Where were you? Who was there? What was happening? What choices did you make? Then after describing the experience in detail, ask yourself what were you ignoring at that time?

For example, say your memory is of a time in your life when you were experiencing chaos in your family, when people simply were not getting along. What is the fundamental value that you were not honoring at that time? Was it peace? Connection? Love? Respect? Or something else? Perhaps you went through a time when you were indoors a lot. Perhaps you were ill or had a desk job under fluorescent lights. Perhaps you were not honoring your value of health or nature or physical activity. It will be different for everyone.

For *you*, what was missing? What fundamental piece of your makeup did you ignore at that time? The values you discover may be the same as the five to ten that you listed above or you may discover some additional values.

- **Exercise Three: The pie of life**

To bring your life into balance, you must find a way to honor all of your values. This requires an initial determination as to where you spend your time in

terms of values. The benefit of determining your values in this way is that it reveals what you truly value, based not on who you would like to be, or who you think you should be, but based upon who you are and what you are honoring in your life today.

To do this, you will spend one week writing down *everything* you do: work, sleep, being with family, exercise, TV, going out, gardening, etc. Add up the number of hours. There are 168 hours in a week. Then create a pie chart. (To create a pie chart, go to www.nces.ed.gov/nceskids/createAgraph/default.aspx. This site makes it simple.)

Divide the pie into sections that describe where you spend your time. Then from the list of values you developed above, label each daily action with the value being honored. You will label the values in whatever way resonates with you. For example, exercising may represent the value of health for one person; for another it may represent peace; for another respect of self; for another fun. Then you will make each pie wedge a size that represents the percentage of the total amount of time per week (168 hours) that you spent living each value.

Now that you have completed these exercises, write down your top ten values. Then next to the value, rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 as to how you “live” each value. Use the pie of life to assist you in determining your ratings.

Change your life to conform to your values

Now that you have established some of your values and the extent to which you live each value, you can begin to make changes in keeping with your values. Begin small – create an action step you can take this week that will allow you to live a value you hold that is not being fully recognized in your life.

For example, if your satisfaction on your health value is low, this week com-



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mit to exercising three days or taking vitamins – whatever works for you. See how it feels. The following week, increase your time with another value. If your peace value rates low in satisfaction, perhaps you will go into nature for 10 minutes a day or meditate for five minutes a day.

Conclusion

Once you begin to consciously choose where you spend your time, you

will find it much easier to balance out the various areas of your life. When you are in balance in your life, you can bring more energy to your work and to everything you do. As a result, you will feel more centered, fulfilled and satisfied. Begin to balance your life, starting now!



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