

THEORY & PRACTICE

Up and coming general managers have a new set of priorities for their work-life complexities and businesses overlook this at their own cost

GENERATION 'NO'

FOR THE FIRST TIME, PARTICULARLY IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES, talented Generation Y general managers are looking at senior partners and articulating with increasing confidence that they do not see them as inspiring role models. They are also sending out the message that their personal lives will not always come second to work.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to handling the complexities of work and personal life, but if businesses are to survive the western demographic time bomb, where companies fight over a shrinking pool of talent, it must be tackled.

If senior executives fail to create the right work environment for Generation Y talent, they will neither attract nor retain the brightest and the best and company performance will start to suffer.

Despite experts' predictions that many people will now live to the age of 100 and work well into their 80s, a survey by London Business School has discovered that less than half (40%) of senior executives rank their work-life balance as a high priority when considering their development for the next three to five years.

This is in direct contrast to the priorities of their Generation Y employees. Last year, London Business School revealed the results of a five-year survey of participants from its Leading Teams for Emerging Leaders executive education programme. The survey found that Generation Y puts work-life balance at the top of the priority list, leaving promotion prospects in third place behind organisational culture. This is not a bull market but a genuine change in attitude of a generation determined to enjoy the journey.

One explanation is that first-time general managers are most at risk of burnout. The first general management role is exceptionally tough. This stage of life is known as the double crunch as many people start families and their first general management job at the same time.

The demands from work and personal life have never been greater. Added to this, for the first time in their careers, these managers cannot rely on their technical expertise. Their new 18-hour-day roles demand a different

set of skills. Their job centres less on what they know but more on how they manage and lead a team and build relationships across the organisation. Added to this, they have genuine accountability and relatively little control, and what starts as quality control all too easily becomes exhausting micro-management.

Although senior executives have survived the middle management years, they would do well to listen to their successors. More than 95% of the senior executives I work with tell me they are 'hurry sick', namely addicted to email and disillusioned with inefficient meetings.

Crises after a missed promotion, redundancy or a death in the family are disturbingly common, prompting them to reflect on their priorities. Realising that they have achieved everything they thought would make them happy, but finding they are unhappier than they have ever been is at the heart of the mid-life crisis. Although not inevitable, it is a disturbing phenomenon that can be observed all too often.

Merely climbing the corporate ladder does not make staff happy and this pattern is not what is going to inspire the next generation of employees to join and stay loyal to an organisation. Individuals almost certainly need to spend more time asking themselves what matters most in their lives.

A retired hospice nurse who spent her entire career looking after people who were dying recently wrote a wonderful book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. Having spent all this time talking to these people, she says five main regrets emerged: living the lives others expected of them rather than being true to themselves; working too hard; not having had the courage to express their feelings; not having stayed in touch with friends; and not having allowed themselves to be happy.

This question of what matters to a person most in their life is something that everyone has to figure out as an individual. Typically, there are five key areas: relationships, friends, you, health and family. It is important not to lose sight of a significant other, the one person who should still be there when the children have left home. Failure to invest in these

key relationships is a common mistake. Spending time with friends is important too, although that does not mean sending a Christmas card once a year. It means regular catch-ups every fortnight or so. Research shows that people who have strong relationships with their friends live longer than those who do not.

It is important to remember oneself too – those things called hobbies and interests that a person used to have. These are the first casualties in the double crunch of work and family. Looking after ourselves and doing the things that help recharge our batteries is critically important. A person may also have a spiritual, community life, volunteering and taking part in other areas that are important to them.

When looking at where work fits into this picture, the problem quickly becomes apparent: work essentially overlaps everything else. The problem is that if someone is serious about their career and they care about their work, work easily explodes the boundaries. Once upon a time, there was a home life, a commute and work. Nowadays, with 24-hour email, that does not exist, and when not careful, work expands. People can now work all the time, even on holiday. Most executives will not book a holiday unless they can guarantee there is wi-fi in the hotel, by the pool or in the ski chalet.

Setting the boundaries

So how can the complexity of work and personal life be managed? First, it should be understood that the concept of a work-life balance is a false dichotomy. It assumes that one is good and one is bad and that they are clearly defined and so can be equally balanced. That, unfortunately, is something of a fantasy.

Boundaries should be created, things in one's life that are non-negotiable. The truth is that no one else is going to look after you. This is not HR's responsibility nor the boss's responsibility; it's each individual's responsibility.

If these non-negotiables are created about all the things a person cares about in their life, it helps to protect their energy. By the age of 40, the choices an individual makes have a permanent effect on the quality and the length of their life. For example, giving up smoking before the age of 40 does not affect life expectancy. After the age of 40, although it is still important to give up, the reality is that, statistically, the person will die younger.

As people get older, the consequences matter. Protecting a person's energy means they are more stable and less susceptible to the type of energy spikes that leave them going to bed tired but wired. Only then can they focus on what matters. All the latest research demonstrates that it is not stress that is the determining factor in wellbeing but the attitude to



stress. It is human nature that we underestimate future uncertainty – the number of bumps in the road that will be encountered.

For some people, these bumps will be big. No one can control what happens, but what can be controlled is the response to it. It is the attitude to positive and negative events that determines everything: happiness, longevity and health.

If managing the complexities of work and home life is an individual responsibility, one might ask if companies can do anything to respond to these calls from Generation No for a more balanced life. They can.

More continuous professional development focused on attitudes and mind-set would be a promising start. Most companies reviewing their professional development opportunities would find a heavy weighting towards skills development.

Well-being 360° reviews are a good next step. London Business School is rolling out health diagnostics and six-month reviews with participants on its new general management programmes, Transition into General Management and Senior Executives Programme.

Involving employees in determining how best to achieve the company's purpose is also essential. If an employee is not in a fulfilling work environment, it affects every other relationship in their life. A collaborative approach to strategy will encourage people to bring their minds to work and go beyond the minimum.

Ninety percent of good ideas do not come from the executive suite. The senior executive's job is to create a context in which others have confidence and purpose. It might take courage to relinquish the command and control mandate of our industrial forefathers, but organisations are more robust than is generally thought. Millennials more intuitively grasp this way of working and, arguably, they will do a better job of running organisations than the previous generation.

People are always being told to be careful in their careers, to the point where it can feel as though companies are as fragile as china shops. The reality is that organisations are not china shops; they are more resilient than everybody thinks. People have to take risks and, in the words of Mark Twain, "sail away from the harbour".

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