



"Mentors of Color" © Christy Morvath

Effective Mentoring to Achieve a Healthy Work-Life Balance

by Monica M. Horvath

Many women in science and engineering fields have at one time confronted the Superwoman Syndrome. Although treatment programs are not generalizable, the symptoms are well known: Crippling anxiety over trying to juggle the roles of parent, spouse, community volunteer, domestic goddess, and of course, a

high-achieving, career-driven dynamo. When trying to wear all of these hats, mentors are an invaluable resource (and at times a lifesaver) on issues of work-life balance, for they can offer perspective and suggest strategies honed from their own struggles. Unfortunately, mentors who can effectively speak about work-life balance are not always available to everyone. In these cases, early career scientists¹ in need of guidance should consider the formal mentoring programs offered by MentorNet, the E-Mentoring Network for Diversity in Engineering and Science (<http://www.MentorNet.net>). MentorNet recruits scientists and engineers as mentors for its One-on-One programs, which match protégés from over 100 participating college campuses and affiliated partners to mentors in industry, government laboratories, and higher education. Participants work through a coaching curriculum that prompts advice and discussion for individuals in early phases of their careers.

Work-life balance is of course a highly personal issue, and one person's solution may not be another person's solution. However, a survey of MentorNet mentors revealed some commonalities in both defining the issues and developing time management approaches that are worthy of consideration for all scientists and engineers.

Taking a 'time-out': It's a necessity

MentorNet mentors overwhelmingly agree that the single greatest mistake early career scientists make is not arranging for enough personal and family time in their lives. Particularly for individuals who go through long training periods, stepping away from the bench or computer becomes unnatural and can be accompanied by feelings of guilt or sloth. One mentor discloses, "All of my protégés have had to deal with the guilt aspect of free time. Taking time off to travel or have fun with friends is stigmatized. I make sure to tell them that I didn't take time off when I was in graduate school and wished that I had later." Dr. Amy Lovell, Associate Professor of Astronomy at Agnes Scott College, reaffirms this position. "I think the greatest mistake is exerting too much effort on work

at the expense of other aspects of life, assuming that one will have more time later for spending with family and friends. Once overworking patterns are established, they are hard to break."

Another hard truth is that refusing to take this time (or refusing to believe that making time is possible) can compromise one's long-term productivity. It is easy to find studies and news articles demonstrating that after about eight to ten hours of work, one's ability to work efficiently and accurately decreases drastically. A MentorNet mentor who works in an industrial sector knows this all too well. "When I work long hours, I start making mistakes and going up blind alleys. And after a good night's sleep, I can see those errors and realize I was wasting my time. I had numerous graduate school experiences of working for hours in the evening trying in vain to debug a program, and the next morning seeing a fix within thirty minutes. I eventually decided to stop working by 5 or 6 PM. I've continued with that plan, with only a few exceptions, for over twenty-five years." Dr. Sarah Johnson, a Senior Lecturer at Simon Fraser University, agrees. "I have also found that when I am stuck on a problem, taking a break for a few hours and then coming back to it often leads me to a solution in the shortest time. I believe your brain continues to work on problems subconsciously to some extent while you are participating in a less intellectually challenging activity. Like one of my professors in graduate school used to say, 'If you get stuck on a problem, go take a shower.'"

Managing Your Employer's Expectations and Your Own

In the business world, the proper attitude is more important than ever. Although pride in one's work is a necessity for job satisfaction, achieving balance can be affected by one's attitude towards the position and misunderstanding of one's role in a corporate environment. Dr. Tom Wilson, MentorNet mentor and a Senior Chemical Research and Development Engineer, cautions, "When I started my career, I made the choice to totally devote myself to the company. I did this in the belief that the company would appreciate and reward me. But I soon discovered that 'business is business' and it does not matter how dedicated and successful you are, or what you've been told by superiors. If for business reasons you are no longer needed, then you are gone. Once you separate your worth as a person from your job, then striking a work-life balance comes more naturally. This lesson, which took me two times to learn, is what I try to pass on to my protégés."

"I didn't learn my lesson either," admits another MentorNet mentor who wishes to remain anonymous. "I've played *WonderWoman* several times in my career. The problem is that one can do it for a while, but eventually, there comes a time where one can't sustain the role. In the business world where the idea of continuous im-

¹For the MentorNet program, participation as a protégé limited to undergraduates/graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and early-career faculty.

provement has taken hold, last year's performance becomes this year's base standard. The fallacy of this is that continuous improvement is about incremental changes. But to become *Wonder Woman*, 2-3 step changes must be made and sustained each year."

It is clear then that managing your boss's expectations can be just as critical as managing one's own if work-life balance is to be struck. Part of doing this is to aim to be a living example of a balanced work ethic and dispel the myth of "workaholicism." One may begin by simply refusing to participate in the stress-inducing head games of petty one-upmanship such as, "Who left latest last night?" and, "Who took the shortest vacation?" A mentor at a national laboratory reminds us that "because of the perception that the number of hours one works counts more than accomplishments, one must have a 'tough skin' to stick to a shorter schedule and believe that ultimately the results will be what counts. One must have the self-confidence to ignore what others may think."

Strategies to Attain Balance

Although it is clear that taking a mandatory time-out is essential to one's well being, there still remains the question as to how to consistently ensure this will happen. One simple method is to set aside at least a half-day a week that is entirely work-free; another is to keep to a ritual of not taking work home. But this can be difficult for those of us who are unaccustomed to the idea or have erratic work schedules requiring evening events or meetings. A second option proposed by numerous MentorNet mentors is to at least build structured activities into the week, such as social groups, exercise, or classes, which require fixed appointments. One graduate student elaborates, "If I set up a personal training appointment at my gym for 7:00 PM on a week day, then I know I have a fixed amount of time to complete my work and I am not able to cancel last-minute without losing \$30. This keeps me working very efficiently throughout the day but at the same time puts a reasonable cap on the total work volume."

Many MentorNet mentors also suggest that a spreadsheet color-coded by priority and status can aid in finding workable pockets of time, for it acts as a type of 'balance scorecard' that maps responsibilities visually. When followed by proactive scheduling practices and a well-maintained electronic calendar, one has a more clear idea of the time available and can make decisions as to what group of tasks constitutes a reasonable day's work. Dr. Ann M. Viano, Associate Professor of Physics at Rhodes College, advises, "I suggest that my protégés separate work and personal time by setting daily goals to be accomplished and focusing only on those goals. If they achieve them, then when it's time to go home for the day, they can wholly concentrate on family, friends, or other activities." It is true that these approaches cannot solve the problem of having more tasks and bigger goals than available time. But the simple fact is that the eschewal of excess labor can either occur in a planned manner or a stress-laden, last minute rejection. Most would agree that the former strategy certainly gives one a feeling of greater control over life. Viano adds, "There are solutions to almost every work-life balance problem, but you really need to find the courage to ask for help, not the time and energy to just complain about it all. Ask your colleagues for tips on preparing for class efficiently even though you're running on no sleep because you have a newborn at home. Ask your super-

visor if your workplace has ever considered spouse job-sharing if you and your spouse are trying to solve the dual-career problem in the same field. Ask family to visit and help out at home during busy times at work."

Recognize That Balance is Not Always Attainable

Most MentorNet mentors confide that even their most well-rounded colleagues have times where balance is unattainable, and this has to be recognized and abided. The lack of balance during acute periods when dissertations are written, grants are prepared, and critical experiments are completed does not make one abnormal or a failure. But one may need to seriously reevaluate one's career path if non-work time becomes constantly unattainable. Dr. Lovell emphasizes, "I believe there are career tracks that are all work and expect the full devotion of the scientist at the expense of all other aspects of life. I have chosen a path where I can succeed, but at my own pace, and I encourage all early-career scientists to start at the very beginning with a model where they have time to do the things, both professionally and personally, that they value most. For some people, success is defined with respect to the all-work-no-play career, and this either leads them into those career paths, or leaves them feeling torn if later on they desire changes in favor of balance."

No matter whether a scientist has found a workable balance or stands at a rough spot career-wise, a mentor can be a sounding board for frustrations, a provider of strategies, or a cheerleader when goals have been met. But it is always the protégé's responsibility to seek help and develop these relationships, which can be accomplished through a program like MentorNet. Dr. Maria Toledo-Rodriguez of the Brain Mind Institute in Switzerland reminisces about the relationship she enjoyed as a MentorNet protégée. "The strong point of the MentorNet relationship is the pseudo-anonymity. All my mentors have been from different fields so I could tell them what was in my head and life without worrying that any of my words might reach the ears of a hiring committee or my bosses.... My mentor has always been there for me. When I was on a rough patch I could just send him an email pouring my heart out and he would answer me showing me that things were not such a disaster, and that there was always at least one solution to every problem." Having a positive attitude regarding the feasibility of work-life balance is the most important initial step of achieving it, even if the answers are not immediately obvious or palatable at first examination. Reach out to your mentors to help you uncover these solutions. ■



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