

# Work + Home + Community + Self

by Stewart D. Friedman

FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2014 ISSUE

**T**ake an assessment—produced in partnership with Qualtrics—of your Total Leadership skills, and learn how to strengthen them and about people who exemplify them.

Overcommitted. Distracted. Stressed out. Stretched too thin. This is how many of us describe ourselves today. I hear it from men and women; from the young and the old; from executives, MBA students, doctors, retailers, artisans, research scientists, soldiers, stay-at-home parents, teachers, and engineers around the world. In an age of constant communication and economic pressure, everyone is struggling to have meaningful work, domestic bliss, community engagement, and a satisfying inner life. Some have already given up on the idea of having it all: As I discovered last year in a study comparing undergraduates from the classes of 1992 and 2012 at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, a significant number of Millennials (the generation born from 1980 to 2000) are deciding not to become parents, because they don't see how they can fit children into their busy lives.

A commitment to better “work/life balance” isn't the solution. As I've argued for a long time—and as many more people are now asserting—balance is bunk. It's a misguided metaphor because it assumes we must always make trade-offs among the four main aspects of our lives: work or school, home or family (however you define that), community (friends, neighbors, religious or social groups), and self (mind, body, spirit). A more realistic and more gratifying goal is better *integration* between work and the rest of life through the pursuit of *four-way wins*, which improve performance in all four dimensions.

Such integration starts with embracing three key principles—be real, be whole, and be innovative—that I described in a 2008 HBR article, “Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life.” It takes certain skills to bring those principles to life. In my 30 years as a professor, researcher, consultant, and executive, as I’ve studied and served thousands of people, I’ve found 18 specific skills that foster greater alignment and harmony among the four life domains. In this article I describe those skills and offer exercises—drawn from the latest findings in organizational psychology and related fields—to help you hone a few of the skills that business professionals often find most difficult to master. While there’s more you can do to instill the three principles (you’ll find a wider range of exercises in my new book, *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life*), the advice offered here will help you move down the right path.

## Skills for Being Real

For well over a decade I’ve run a program called Total Leadership that teaches the three principles to executives, MBA candidates, and many others. It starts with a focus on being real—how to act with authenticity by clarifying what’s important, wherever you are, whatever you’re doing. That requires you to:

- Know what matters.
- Embody values consistently.
- Align actions with values.
- Convey values with stories.
- Envision your legacy.
- Hold yourself accountable.

The ability to do the first two things is especially crucial. Let’s begin with how to know what matters. One exercise that enhances this skill, called *four circles*, has you examine the importance and congruence of your various roles and responsibilities in life. (You can do it online at this free site: [www.myfourcircles.com](http://www.myfourcircles.com).) You start by drawing circles representing the four domains—work, home, community, and self—varying the sizes to reflect how much you value each. Next you move the circles to show whether and to what degree they overlap. At this point you think about

the values, goals, interests, actions, and results you pursue in each domain. Are they compatible or in opposition? Imagine what your life would be like if your aspirations in all four circles, and the means by which you achieved them, lined up perfectly, like the concentric rings of a tree trunk. For most of us that's an unattainable ideal, but what actions could you realistically take to move toward that kind of overlap? Could you change how you work, or even how you think about the purpose of your work, without diminishing the personal value you derive from it? Could you help your family to better see how your business life benefits them so that they would be more supportive of it?

A complementary exercise, called *conversation starter*, encourages people to embody values consistently. This involves bringing an object from your nonwork life (such as a family photograph, a travel memento, or a trophy) into the office. If a colleague mentions it, you explain what this part of your life means to you *and* how it helps you at work. Then you consider asking that person to bring his or her own conversation starter. You might also take something from your work to your home and talk to your roommates, spouse, kids, or dinner guests about it. Tell them about what you do and who you are in your role at work, focusing especially on what this might mean for them.

When Victoria, the head of marketing for a pharmaceutical company division, drew her four circles, she initially placed the biggest one, representing work, apart from all the rest. She didn't see any real connection between her professional identity and her home, community, and inner lives. But when she began to talk about the separation with a few colleagues, friends, and family members, she came to realize that one major aspect of her mission as an executive—promoting greater health—was a lot more compatible with her other circles than she had thought.

Balance is bunk. It's a misguided notion that assumes we must always make trade-offs among the different aspects of our lives.

She could also see how just a few small changes in approach might create much more overlap. For example, at home she started to talk more with her two daughters about the social impact of her business, sharing stories about all the ways in which her company's medicines were saving lives. The girls responded with greater pride in, and understanding of, their mom's commitment to work. As a team leader, Victoria began to reframe core drug-marketing tasks in terms of the products' benefits to end users—who were all the children, spouses, parents, siblings, friends, or

neighbors of someone—just like the families and communities she and her employees had. As a result, her group became more impassioned and hardworking, which ultimately eased her load and gave her more time for other pursuits. Perhaps most important, Victoria felt less guilt about the way she was spending her time and energy, and newly secure in her mission at the office as well as in her family's support.

## Skills for Being Whole

The second principle that Total Leadership addresses is being whole—or acting with integrity. What I mean by that is respecting the fact that all the roles you play make up one whole person and encouraging others to view you the same way. To do that you must be able to:

- Clarify expectations.
- Help others.
- Build supportive networks.
- Apply all your resources.
- Manage boundaries intelligently.
- Weave disparate strands.

One of the most important skills here is knowing how to apply all your resources (such as your knowledge, skills, and contacts) in the various domains of your life to benefit the other domains. An exercise that helps you do that is called *talent transfer*. It involves writing a résumé listing all the skills you've developed—from mentoring colleagues, organizing family activities, or running a church bake sale—and thinking of how each might be used to achieve different ends.

Organizational psychologists call this a strength development approach: You identify your talents and then apply them in new areas, enhancing them further. Another way to do this is to reflect on something that makes you feel good—a work accomplishment, a fruitful friendship, your commitment to salsa dancing—and then consider an area of your life you'd like to improve. How might the skills you used to achieve the former help you in the latter?

To manage boundaries intelligently is another key challenge. I advise people to practice something I call *segment and merge*, and then decide which strategy works best when. First, think about ways to create separation (in time and space) between your different roles. You might try setting limits on yourself. For example, if there's an ambitious work project that you've been putting off, try dedicating the first two hours of each Saturday morning for the next month to tackling it, and then give yourself the rest of the day off. Or, if your job keeps monopolizing your evenings, you might experiment with a "no smartphones at the dinner table" policy. Now do the opposite: Think about opportunities to bring together two or more parts of your life. You might take a child to a company-sponsored charity run or bring a coworker to a block party in your neighborhood. After you've tried a new way of segmenting and a new way of merging, jot down your insights about what worked and what didn't, for both you and the people around you. Were you more or less productive? Did you find yourself more or less distracted? How did others react? Were they put off, or did they seem to feel closer to and more trusting of you?

An example of the segmenting concept in action comes from Brian, a manager in an accounting firm. In a monthlong experiment, he set aside his 40-minute train rides to and from work solely for "downtime." He caught up on e-mails to family and friends and invested in his own development through reading and reflection—for example, by diagramming the factors affecting his sense of stability, including his stress and energy levels and his feelings about himself, his relationships, and his future. Sometimes, as an alternative to that inward focus, he had conversations with the neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances he sat next to on the train, exchanging advice about everything from child care to real estate. This simple reallocation of commuting time—from doing work to other things—resulted, perhaps paradoxically, in Brian's being better prepared for work and more proactive about his career progression. He also felt closer to his extended family and the old friends with whom he'd reconnected and to the people in his local community, because he was engaging with more of them on his way to the office and back. Having an after-work buffer period allowed him to reenter his home with less stress and more openness and to develop new insights about how he could be a better father and husband. Personally, he also felt "more grounded and less crazed." He came to see more clearly the positive impact of rest and recovery on his performance, which led him to experiment with increasing his sleep time by about an hour a day. Again, the small shift in boundaries significantly boosted his productivity, well-being, and relationships. Everyone with whom he interacted daily noticed that he was less cranky and more energetic.

## **Skills for Being Innovative**

The third Total Leadership principle is to be innovative—to act with creativity in identifying and pursuing more four-way wins. To do so, you need to:

- Focus on results.
- Resolve conflicts among domains.
- Challenge the status quo.
- See new ways of doing things.
- Embrace change courageously.
- Create cultures of innovation around you.

*Scenario* exercises are one of several effective methods of increasing your capacity to focus on results, especially on the quality of your contributions rather than the amount of time or energy you spend on them. Scenarios involve identifying a specific goal you want to achieve and then listing three alternative ways to get there, including the resources you'll need and the challenges you'll face. This sort of brainstorming encourages you to keep your eyes on the prize. Another method is experimenting with new patterns of behavior, trying activities at new times or in different places. It could be something as simple as shaving at the gym instead of at home, or practicing your trumpet at the office after hours rather than disturbing your neighbors at home. What were the pros and cons of switching up your routine? How did it affect your results?

*Crowdsourcing* is an exercise that helps you practice how to see new ways of doing things. To try this, gather a group of your most creative friends and describe a problem you're facing. Then ask for ideas about potential solutions and record what you hear. Select the one you think wisest, draft a plan, and try to make it happen. Stay in touch with your advisers, at least weekly, and after a month or so review your results with them. If the approach you tried didn't work, or if you need more time to solve the problem, tweak your behavior or try another idea altogether, drawing on what you learned from the first experiment.

Former Bain & Company CEO Tom Tierney took not months but years to think about and solicit advice on what would eventually become the Bridgespan Group—an independent nonprofit that was incubated in and then spun out of Bain—which provides strategic consulting and leadership development to philanthropists, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations. In the 1980s he began to think, write, and talk about his idea for what he then generically called “Make a Difference Company,” picking the brains of colleagues and friends, including the likes of the presidential adviser and founder of Common Cause, John Gardner. Emboldened by those conversations, Tierney at first took small steps to move closer to his vision by, for example, volunteering for the United Way of the Bay Area while he was running Bain’s San Francisco office and eventually joining the nonprofit’s board. This was the first of many on which he would serve. In 1999, Tierney folded all that experience, knowledge, and crowdsourced wisdom into Bridgespan, and a year later he stepped down as chief executive of Bain to focus on the new organization. Leading the life you want is a craft. As with music, writing, dance, or any athletic endeavor, you can always get better at it by practicing. That’s why I developed these exercises and many others. Start with these three big ideas: Be real, be whole, and be innovative. Understand the skills you need to accomplish each. And then commit to doing the fun and fruitful work of making them part of your leadership repertoire.

A version of this article appeared in the September 2014 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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