

Work-Life Balance - Don't Burn Out Your Team

by Jim Bird

I live in a Major League city whose baseball team is known for its pitching staff. The constant sports chatter is who is going to be the 5th starter in the pitching rotation? Why don't they eliminate that problem by just going with their 3 or 4 best pitchers? Let one of those Cy Young winners start every third game.

Well, even a fair-weather baseball fan like me knows that answer... they don't want to burn up their stars' arms before their contracts run out. They are protecting their stars' ability to pitch, to do the job over a career.

What do your company's star players pitch with? If you are in the Technology business, it's their minds, not their arms. But like baseball, it is also their psyches and their emotional commitment for the team and the job. And stars and non-stars alike can burn all of that up. Many of them, in your company, already have to varying degrees.

It's not that they've quit trying - but you are not getting 90 mile an hour fast balls out of them anymore. But unlike in baseball, you don't even know they've lost their good stuff. Since you don't have a radar gun for performance, it may be years before you figure out that a former star has been a liability for awhile.

What to do? First recognize that most of that burn out doesn't take place on the job. It takes place in an individual's off the job life. Obviously if someone's family or personal relationships are a disaster, or his physical, mental and emotional well-being a wreck, he's not going to be near the work contributor he could be. And he will take a toll on the performance of everyone around him. Well what if those areas are not tragic, but are just poor or getting weaker? Within a few months time lag, so will be his job performance.

How do you avoid this and keep your team in top shape not only for the season, but for their entire careers with your firm? It's not that hard. The two part answer is don't let your players over-pitch for an entire season and make sure they are skilled in off the field conditioning. Put another way, make sure you are selective in when and how your team members overwork and find ways to train them on keeping the rest of their life in great shape.

Today we call this Work-Life Balance. This is not fluff stuff. In the 1990s, the annualized stock market return for the Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For is more than double that of the S & P 500. The two factors distinguishing those on the Best lists are "...promoting work/life balance and training."

Think of these two attributes as the left and right legs of the Work-Life Balance ladder. The left leg is what your organization can do for each employee in terms of policies and benefits to promote positive work-life balance. The right leg is what each individual can do for herself.

The foundation that both of these legs rest on is the company's culture. Does your company culture say "In addition to having a job, we respect that you have a life." Do you and your management team understand the critical business importance of Work-Life Balance and instill that importance in all your employees. In a Gallup Poll of two million employees on why they stayed with a company or jumped ship, "A caring boss rated higher with most than either money or fringe benefits." As managers we need to not just say it, but believe it and demonstrate it.

Here are some specifics to consider. On the left leg of the ladder, “What the organization can do for the employee”, some companies can provide a full slate of flex-time, telecommuting, child-care, elder care, leave, job sharing, EAP, in-house shopping/services, gym subsidies, and concierge services. More often, organizations must carefully select what they can periodically add from this list to their traditional benefits. Your work-life policies must be consistent with achieving your business objectives.

The right leg, “What the individual can do for themselves” should be supported by practical work-life skills training. Don’t go with unproven theory. Whether you bring in specific work-life training, recommend a book, or share an approach you learned from a friend, make sure that first you are personally benefiting and using what you learned on an ongoing basis.

Finding these concrete ways of addressing Work-Life Balance will drive higher Achievement and Enjoyment levels on the job and maintain high-level performers season after season.

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