

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Life's Balancing Act

by Dr. Mike Armour

When I begin working with a new coaching client, the first conversation usually centers around the client's expected outcomes. What specific, observable result does he or she want from the coaching experience?

Commonly people list "a more balanced life" as a strongly desired outcome. Little wonder. Life is coming at us so fast that we are inundated with demands and distractions. Fighting against that torrent, it's easy to get things out of balance.

"A more balanced life," however, doesn't mean "a perfectly balanced life." In fact, there's no such thing as "a perfectly balanced life." Life is never fully in balance. Instead it is moving every moment either toward greater balance or away from greater balance.

Passing Through The Balance Point

In this regard life is much like riding a bicycle. While we speak of keeping the bicycle in balance, we never actually have it balanced. Instead, we are continuously moving through the balance point, first to the left, then to the right, then back to the left again. The same is true of a tightrope walker, whose balancing pole, with its gentle up-and-down movements, marks out visually the pattern of passing back and forth through the balance point.

What we call "keeping our balance" on a bicycle is actually a complex process of sensing when we have passed through the balance point and immediately correcting in the opposite direction. Early on, when we are first learning to ride the bike, spills and falls come regularly. Our senses are not yet acutely attuned to the balance point. By the time they realize that we've crossed the balance point, it's too late. The bike is already toppling to its side.

Then one day it all clicks. Our cycling equilibrium becomes so refined and intuitive that we can ride for hours, almost without effort and never once feeling that we are about to fall over. The more expert we become, the more subtle we are with our corrections, for we can sense instantly when we've crossed the balance point.

Multiple Balance Points

The art of effective living requires us to develop a similar intuitive sense of passing through the balance point, then immediately correcting.. With a bicycle, however, we are only concerned with balance in one dimension, left to right. With life, on the other hand, we are challenged with keeping balance in numerous dimensions. The balance between

family and career. Between long hours of work and time given to renewal. Between taking care of self and taking care of others. The list goes on and on.

Thus, when a client says, "I want more balance in my life," I must immediately ask, "In what dimension of life?" Then I ask them to describe why balance is important to them in that dimension (this gives me a glimpse into their values) and to picture for me what balance in that arena would look like. Sometimes they don't know. Just as you learn to ride a bicycle "by feel," many people depend entirely on "feelings" to let them know that life is out of balance.

For riding a bicycle, feelings provide an adequate "feedback system" to know when correction is necessary. But when it comes to keeping life in balance, feelings are a less reliable barometer. Busy-ness and high-demand responsibilities have a way of consuming our emotional bandwidth. Feelings of imbalance, if they surface at all, are quickly crowded aside. Our first indication that things are out of balance may come in a painful form. A marriage going on the rocks. Severe health problems. A blow-up in a valued relationship.

Balance Point Audits

That's why it's important to take time — to make time — several times a year for an unhurried, quiet assessment of all the arenas of life in which balance is important to you. Work from clear criteria. What constitutes balance in my family life? What constitutes balance in my career commitments? What constitutes balance in my exercise and fitness regimen? How well am I doing in each of these?

In none of these areas will you ever live in absolute balance. But the purpose of this checkup is to look at the past few weeks and determine which side of the various balance points you've been living on, then make any necessary corrections.

From a functional standpoint, expertise in any field is merely the ability to make finer and finer distinctions. Expert bike riders can make very minute balancing adjustments because they know instantly when the bicycle is ever so slightly left or right of balance. Expertise in maintaining life balance is no different. Frequent "check-ups" allow us to ascertain where we're moving too far away from the balance point and start back in the opposite direction.

When was the last time you took a balance-check on your life?

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