

What Family Firms Can Teach Us About Work-Life Balance

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Blurring work and personal lives can lead to stress and exhaustion. Family businesses do these four things to create healthier boundaries.

From the launch of the first cellphone with email capabilities in 1993, people have struggled with separating work and their personal lives. It has gotten worse since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, when companies embraced digital tools that let employees work from home but also made them available 24/7. The line between work and personal life has remained blurry long past the pandemic, and it creates stress, exhaustion, and confusion for leaders. In fact, studies show it can lead to excessive working hours, reduced physical activity, and more intrusive thoughts.

The underlying problem is that digital technology has removed the “contextual markers” that once signaled to us that we are in work mode or off-duty. These signals once might have been picking up your briefcase before leaving home for the office, time spent in a car or train during the commute back and forth, or kicking off your shoes and putting on a favorite pair of slippers once home from work. COVID-19 changed all that: Many people worked from home, in their slippers, at a couch or kitchen table.

The aftermath of all this is especially keen for enterprising families, whose spheres of work and home life have always overlapped. These increasingly blurred boundaries can strain relationships and decision-making, but they also present opportunities to foster emotional intelligence, develop governance practices, and navigate these complexities with greater resilience and adaptability.

Through our work with enterprising families, we’ve learned four valuable lessons that can help both family

and non-family business leaders thrive – and that can be useful for employees too:

1. Create ‘rooms’ for work and personal life to avoid mixing boundaries

Family business leaders have successfully navigated boundary overlap by creating distinct “rooms” for different roles. Banyan Global’s 4-Room model, for instance, designates an Owner Room, Board Room, Management Room, and Family Room, where specific topics pertaining to each of these domains are being discussed. While some see this as a conceptual framework, others take it more literally and dedicate four physical rooms in their home or office, where each of these topics can be discussed. One family with whom we worked had different meeting rooms on different floors of their headquarters, to host family, shareholder, management board, or foundation meetings. The idea behind this four-room system was to create distinct spaces for the discussion of these critical topics and reduce the constant discussion of the business, permeating the entire home.

Along with family business leaders, anyone who runs a company with remote workers can benefit from this approach. For that matter, so can anyone who works from home. If you don’t have an entire room just for work, designate an area of the house or a piece of furniture, such as a small office, table, or set of chairs. Make a family agreement that work does not spill over into the dining area, living room, or bedroom; and, similarly, family time does not occur in the “workspace.”

Additionally, creating rituals and symbolic gestures when switching from one “room” to the next can help your brain transition from “work mode” to “family mode.” This can be as easy as switching your clothes, going for a short walk in between, turning on music, or lighting a

candle in the living room to shift the mood. Over time, such rituals can reinforce boundaries.

2. Separate work and family time with clear time boundaries

Successful enterprising families often create what are known as communication protocols, which can form part of a larger family constitution. These documents guide family members around communication rules, processes around bringing up and resolving conflict, feedback channels, confidentiality, and meeting space rules. Meeting space rules are meant to dictate when you discuss work and when you do not. For example, one family with whom we worked included the protocol that work was not to be discussed during mealtime or before bedtime. This allowed family members to create bounded time spaces where work was not discussed and instead, the focus could stay on the family.

Anyone can adopt similar time-based boundaries by deciding, as a family or with loved ones, to create time spaces where work can and cannot be discussed. As with the example of the family above, this could mean that mealtime and bedtime are places where work is not discussed. Leaders might extend these boundaries to their professional team by clearly defining work hours and setting expectations around response time. Let your colleagues know that there are certain times of the day or on weekends and vacations when you will not respond to emails unless it is urgent. Such time-based boundaries reduce the mental load of always being “on” and provide predictable periods of focus for work versus family.

3. Trust others to do their jobs, and don't micromanage

Family business leaders often face the temptation to check in on relatives, who are both employees and family members, outside of work hours. For example, during a particularly important merger, one family business CEO in our network was tempted to reach out to his cousin over the weekend for a progress check on the financials for the merger. Instead, he resisted and decided that it would be sufficient to see him in the office on Monday. Doing so gave his cousin the reassurance and confidence that he was trusted to do his job, while simultaneously allowing the CEO the freedom to not feel obligated to work on the weekend.

Non-family business leaders can learn to avoid

micromanagement by practicing trust and delegation, trusting that even when they are not “on duty,” the team is competent and can be trusted to do their work. This empowers them and allows them to be released from the obligation to micromanage, ultimately reducing their own stress levels and leading to a healthier and more balanced dynamic for both sides.

4. Embrace flexibility and accept occasional spillover

Despite our best efforts, at times family leaders might discuss work with a partner, delve into the latest business crisis during Sunday brunch with their parents, or check in with a sibling during a particularly critical time in the business. Occasionally bending or breaking the rules can be critical, and people should forgive themselves and others and understand that sometimes they have no choice, due to the situation. For example, during a particularly critical time in the family business, the husband and wife who were leading business regularly talked about the situation at their family dinner table. This allowed their children to understand the realities of the business and make a more informed decision for themselves if being involved in the business was the right choice for them.

Similarly, leaders of any kind of business can understand that occasionally crossing the boundaries that they set can be healthy, offering opportunities for connection, learning, and problem-solving, while also teaching valuable lessons about boundaries and vulnerability. For example, discussing work with your partner can help them to better understand your professional challenges and might lead to fresh perspectives and emotional support. Similarly, taking a work call from the kitchen while your children are having lunch can give them insights into what it means to do your job and provide them with real-world lessons on communication and decision-making. By observing how you navigate workplace conflicts or challenges, children can learn constructive ways to handle stress and seek support when needed – whether for a complex school assignment or a professional setback.

Creating Healthier Dynamics

Leaders today face unprecedented challenges in managing the blurred lines between work and personal life. The four approaches we've described here not only reduce stress and role confusion but also foster stronger relationships, emotional resilience, and meaningful

growth opportunities for everyone.