



How to Seek Balance

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat e-update on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

All my life, I have prided myself on having lots of friends. I like to think that it takes one to know one. Recently, however, my ability to nurture human relationships – some lifelong -- has taken a bit hit. It's a direct result of work.

Like many Americans walloped by the recession, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to put in extra hours and extra effort just to stay financially afloat. Recently, for the first time in my life, one client of my communication training business unceremoniously cut my fees. Another canceled a long-term contract.

On top of those annoyances, most of the lucrative assignments I still have are thousands of miles away. So, travel – which I do without pay -- easily takes as much energy as my jobs. One of my understanding girlfriends, a flight attendant, says I put in as many hours flying as she does – but I have to work on the other end while she gets to jump straight into bed. Thank you, Marie.

Unfortunately, some other friends lack this insight. In recent weeks, three men in my life – thankfully not my husband -- have told me that they are extremely angry with me for neglecting our friendship. Alas, they didn't express their feelings quite so gently. One, in fact, pierced my heart with seemingly irrelevant observations about my behavior. But that's another story.

On the core message of my being unavailable, all three friends were absolutely right. My typical work week starts on Sunday, when I travel from Philadelphia Airport to Los Angeles or San Francisco. The plane is always over packed and often two, three, even eight hours late. On Monday through Friday, I get up at 6 a.m., jet lagged and all, to work a long day that brings me back to my hotel about 6 p.m. Usually, I'm so tired from talking and standing that I can barely pick up the telephone to order pizza delivery, much less chat with folks back home. At 10 p.m. on Friday, I board the red-eye flight from California back to Philadelphia. Unlike many other passengers, I'm unable to sleep without lying down, so I spend the time catching up on reading and paper work.

On Saturday, I unpack, repack, and prepare for the following week. Often, I put in 12 hours creating new PowerPoints as my clothes washer and dryer rumble continuously in the background. The next day, the whole routine starts again.

Is this schedule crazy? Absurd? Ridiculous? Nutty? Frenetic? Absolutely.

Although I love speaking and writing for a living, I most certainly dislike the intense pressures of time and travel. An obvious solution is to get clients on the East Coast, where I live. Believe me, I've tried. But, so far, I've been unable to convince nearby Astra Zeneca in Wilmington, Del., QVC in West Chester, Pa., or Johnson & Johnson in Princeton, N.J., how much I could help their employees become more productive through enhanced speaking, writing, and interacting skills. For whatever reasons, organizations often undervalue consultants who happen to live close by. And so I continue keeping a schedule almost beyond human endurance.



In a perfect world, I would stop work immediately and attend full time to the wonderful human beings in my life. My core value most decidedly is people, not money. Alas, for now, unless billionaire Warren Buffett names me a surprise heiress to his fortune, I need to keep trucking.

Happily, I know I'm far from unique in my struggle for balance. According to the Wall Street Journal, thousands of Americans recently have taken on second and third jobs just to make ends meet. If you're among them, I suspect you – like me -- manage to show adequate care for people in your home, who see firsthand your Herculean efforts to support them. The problem, in my view, is how to nurture relationships with those who lack that close-up picture of your 60, 80, and 100-work week: namely, your extended family and bewildered friends. Here are some ideas I got from skimming several work/life balance books when the situation blew up in my face:

Understand differences. In looking at my platonic relationships with the three men, I realize I never fully explained my situation. None of them has been in a job even remotely resembling mine. All have spent most of their lives in 9-to-5 positions with built-in benefits, pensions, and other perks.

Explain your rationale. Because I tend to be ever cheerful and avoid complaining, I suspect friends think I'm driven by ambition rather than need. The truth is that, like many Americans reeling from the economic breakdown, I am just a few steps from living on the street over a heated grate. And to think I earned a doctorate, partially to avoid such a fate.

Pursue alternatives. In this connected age, you have many communication vehicles besides face-to-face encounters: telephone, e-mail, Facebook, YouTube, greeting cards, regular letters. But be careful. When I tried to nurture one of my friendships by mailing cards, clippings, and gifts, the individual became incensed. He said he felt like a child whose wealthy parents showered him with material gifts, but not love. Ouch.

Acknowledge your limitations. As you may recall from Psychology 101, humans have both lower and higher needs. The first set includes food, clothing, shelter, and reproduction. The second ones are safety, love, and achievement. Until you can satisfy the lower needs, you're in no shape to work on the higher ones.

State your priorities. To be frank, my number-one goal right now is to ward off the distinct possibility of being relegated to a pet food diet as an old woman. And so I spend almost every waking hour working. I pray the situation will change in the not-to-distance future, giving me time to reconnect with friends while all in the same room, hopefully at a luxury spa somewhere in the mountains or at the beach.

Consider subtexts. When I told the story of my three angry male friends to a woman acquaintance, she brought up the issue of gender. How many males, she pointed out, are used to playing second string to a woman's career?

Remain defenseless. To be frank, I was so enraged by comments from two of my three friends that I immediately fired off long, defensive emails. I wish I hadn't. Once you respond angrily to criticism, pointing out the obvious error of the other person's thinking, you suck yourself into a whirlwind of negativity. Let people think what they think about you; in some respects, it's none of your business. By the time I calmed down regarding my friends' accusatory messages toward me, I realized that their underlying statement actually was an upside-down version of "I really miss you." Why on earth should I want to argue with that?