

The Secret to Life Balance: Stop Multi-Tasking and Start Multi-Purposing

By Carol Ring

If you're like most people, you've encountered situations where you *had* to do something, even though there was something else you really *wanted* to do. Perhaps you wanted to take the kids to a movie, but you had to finish a project for work. Or maybe you had to attend a meeting, but you wanted to spend the afternoon working out. Chances are that whatever you had to do won out, and what you wanted to do got put on the back burner...yet again.

Such a scenario happens all the time. People are torn between doing what they want to do (which usually involves personal activities) and doing what they have to do (which usually involves work activities). As such, they're continually searching for life balance—the buzzword of the 80s and 90s that gave people yet another thing to stress about. Consequently, too many people are running at a crazy pace in all directions, all day, only to end up exhausted, unfulfilled, stressed, and dreading that it's going to be exactly the same tomorrow.

Wouldn't it be great if you didn't have to choose between personal and work activities—between what you have to do and what you want to do? Fortunately, such an option does exist. You simply need to stop multi-tasking and start multi-purposing.

The Basis of Multi-Purposing

Multi-purposing means you're using one event, situation, or activity for more than one purpose. It's akin to the old saying, "Kill two birds with one stone." With multi-purposing you're scratching two items off your to-do list (one you have to do and one you want to do) with one activity.

For example, let's say you have to attend a local "People of Influence" awards dinner for your company. As part of that obligation, you have to fill a table with attendees. While you admire your community's leaders, you're not particularly interested in attending the dinner, so this is on your "have to do" list. You also have some people in your life that you mentor on a regular basis. You love mentoring, so this is a "want to do" item.

To multi-purpose this work-related activity, you could invite your mentees to the dinner. This way you're filling your table (and thus fulfilling your work obligation), you're providing your mentees with great information (either from you or from the speakers at the event), and you're reducing the stress in your life as now you don't have to have multiple mentoring sessions or wonder how you're going to fill a table at the awards dinner. This is what multi-purposing is all about—integrating two activities so everyone wins.

Unfortunately, most people don't naturally think of combining activities. They think they have to do each item on their to-do list separately. And because they're so caught up in the day-to-day "have to do" activities, they lose track of the things they enjoy doing. But the more you compartmentalize your life by separating work activities from personal activities, the more fragmented your time becomes. So in a way, multi-purposing involves training your brain to think a little differently. Rather than focus on the many things you have to do, you focus on those things that bring joy to your life and find ways to incorporate other tasks into those activities.

In order to make the most of multi-purposing, consider the following tips.

1. Discover your personal values.

To rediscover what's important to you, brainstorm and write down a list of key words that reflect who you are. For example, your list may include such words as "inquisitive," "integrity," "respect for others," "family," "community involvement, and "honesty." Once you have compiled your list of words that resonate with you, review them to look for themes. You'll find that when you engage in activities that epitomize your key words or values, you're much happier, even when you're working in your "have to do" list.

This exercise of discovering your values will crystallize the things that are most important to you. In life's complicated maze, it will lower the walls of the hedges, eliminate the dead ends, and allow you to clearly see the path you most want to travel. More important, it will give you the freedom to say "no" to certain "have to do" items. And don't worry...when you say "no," lightning won't strike you down, nor will your friends and business acquaintances shun you. The only difference will be that now you're spending time on those things that mean the most to you. Your life will take on a new purpose full of promise and calm.

2. Get perspective on where you are spending your time.

Think of all the different components of your life: health, family, finances, friends, work, community, and spiritual. Rate how you're doing in each area on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "this part of my life is great" and 1 being "this part of my life is suffering." Review your answers. Based on the personal values you identified, are you spending enough time in the areas that matter most to you? Or have you lost focus and are spending your time on things that don't hold much value to you?

If you find that you are spending too much time in non-value oriented areas of your life, is it because of a short-term obligation (such as a temporary work project) or a long-term obligation (such as working in a permanent position you dislike)? If it's a short-term project, acknowledge it and see if you can find some integrated activities that can keep you happy during that time. Be intentional with your focus during this time so you can get over the hump and be true to your values. If it's a long-term obligation, then realize that you can make a choice—to find a new job, to resign from a volunteer position that is no longer fulfilling, to stop living beyond your means, etc. Decide what's best for you and then choose to do it.

3. Build a library of experts.

To help alleviate the burden of some of the items on your to-do list, turn to your network. Everyone has a network of friends, family, co-workers, and community acquaintances. If you take some time and reflect on this network, you will find people who can help you, save you time, and keep you from constantly re-inventing the wheel. Too many people today search the Internet for hours for some key piece of information when their next door neighbor has the answer.

When you access your network of experts, you're not delegating work to them or asking them to do anything; you're simply asking for advice. And if there's one thing people love to give, it's advice. For example, suppose your boss has asked you to choose

a nice restaurant where you can have a lunch meeting with a key client. This is a make-or-break meeting, so your restaurant choice has to be perfect. Rather than search for hours for the ideal venue, why not turn to your network of experts, especially those who regularly do lunch meetings with clients? Again, you're not asking them to cater the lunch meeting or research restaurants for you; you're simply leveraging your network for ideas. The goal is to save yourself time so you're not adding more tasks to your already full to-do list.

Integrate Your Life Today

These days, time is more precious than ever. In order to keep your sanity and happiness in such a fast-paced world, you need to think in terms of integrating your “have to do” and “want to do” activities. No longer can people focus solely on one or other, as that's a recipe for stress and dissatisfaction. So assess your values and current focus, and remember that you don't have to do everything yourself. With a small shift in your thinking, you can make positive and productive progress in all areas of your life.

About the Author:

Carol Ring, is a speaker, author and an expert on Integrated Life™. Through her presentations and seminars, she empowers audiences to integrate their values with their personal and professional lives. Carol is a co-author of “Awakening the Workplace Volume 2,” and is finishing her book on creativity, imagination and problem solving titled “Who Hid My Crayons?” For more information please call 905-326-3251, e-mail carol@carolring.ca or visit www.carolring.ca