



Dr. Bruce Weinstein

## ask the ethics guy!

### The Ethics of Work-Life Balance

By Bruce Weinstein, Ph.D., The Ethics Guy  
*BusinessWeek.com's Ethics Columnist*

We are a nation in pain. According to a March 12 Gallup poll, the number of people in this country classified as "suffering" has increased by 3 million over the past year. Managers and business owners experienced the greatest loss of well-being; 60.8 percent of businesses were thriving in the first quarter of 2008, but this number decreased by almost 14 percent by the fourth quarter.

Given the difficult economic climate and the number of jobs being lost daily, most of us are feeling the pressure to work harder than ever. But in spite of the increasing intensity of our economic crisis, it is not only unfortunate to give in to such pressure. It's unethical.

It's not too late to make a change for the better, though.

It may seem misplaced to discuss [work-life balance](#) in a column about [ethics](#). But recall that one of five fundamental ethical principles is fairness, and that we [demonstrate fairness](#) in everyday life by how we allocate scarce resources. The most precious commodity you have is time, both in your professional and your personal life. It's also your most critical nonrenewable resource. As a manager, you must constantly ask yourself how you should allocate your time. You know it's wrong to spend so much time on one project at the expense of equally critical ones, or to spend so much time managing one employee that you're unable to manage others.

But a good manager should be, first and foremost, a good human being. Just as managing your career well means allocating your time wisely among the different projects and people you oversee, managing your life wisely means giving due time not just to work but to family, friends, community, self and spirit. You wouldn't think of spending most of your work day talking with one client on the phone. Why, then, is it O.K. to devote so much time to your job when you don't give non-work-related things the attention they deserve?

Ethics isn't just about how you treat others. It's also about how you treat yourself – at work and beyond. You're not being fair to others and yourself if you haven't had [a vacation](#) in a long time, or if you force yourself to [work when you've got the flu](#). You're also not being fair to others and yourself if you spend so much time being a good manager that you're not able to be a good parent, spouse or friend. And let's face it: You can't do your job to the best of your ability if you're thoroughly exhausted, and that's not fair to your co-workers or your employer.

But working to the exclusion of all else isn't just unfair (and thus unethical). It's also tragic, because the time you spend away from the other meaningful relationships in your life is time you can never get back.

#### Popular Excuses for Working Too Much

Let's now look at some of the common excuses people give for working so much and how to get beyond them.

"I want to make sure I keep my job."

More than 2.5 million jobs were lost in 2008, and the losses continue to mount. What could be wrong with working all the time in such a climate if it will mean hanging onto your job? Speaking of ethics, isn't there an ethical obligation to keep your job? After all, what would be ethical about not paying bills, or your mortgage, or not being able to take care of your family?

Of course it's important to remain an employee in good standing. But you shouldn't assume that there is a direct correlation with the number of hours you work and the likelihood that you'll hold onto your job. [Downsizing](#) is largely a function of economics rather than of job performance; companies are letting people go to cut their losses and hit budget targets.

(And yes, letting go of good employees raises other ethical issues, but that deserves its own column.) Working 12-hour days six or seven days a week isn't going to guard against getting downsized.

In fact, it could even backfire. You might look like someone who can't manage his or her time or isn't up to the responsibilities of the job. And if you work without any letup, you will reach the point of diminishing returns. This isn't a time to be less than a stellar employee, but working overtime won't get you there.

"I need to work more to make what I did last year."

Many of the recently downsized are taking lower-paying jobs because that's all that is available. Some are even taking second jobs and still not making what they did a year ago. But how important is it now to live in the manner to which you have become accustomed? It's one thing to have to work 70 hours a week just to put food on the table and pay the rent or mortgage. It's another to work so much to be able to afford lavish trips, expensive clothes or a certain lifestyle. Instead of working longer, couldn't you shift your priorities so that you're able to spend more time with family and friends, exercise more often, or even just read some of those books you've been thinking about?

"I have a demanding job."

Gone are the days when leaving your office meant leaving work behind. Many of us choose to use our BlackBerrys, iPhones, laptops and [social networking](#) sites to remain constantly available to our bosses, clients and colleagues, but this can get [out of control](#). It's flattering to believe that you're indispensable to your company, and that only you can do the work you spend so much time doing. This is rarely true, however painful that may be to accept. Be honest with yourself: Are you spending so much time on the job because you must, or because of habit, ego or some other reason? We owe it to ourselves and the people we care about (and who care about us) to work smarter, not harder.

"I just love to work."

It's a blessing to be able to say this, but all passions should have limits. A fully human life is a life in balance, and that means giving due time to all of the things that enrich us, fulfill us and make our lives worth living. When Freud said that work and love were essential components of a happy life, he didn't mean that these were one and the same thing.

There is a time to work and a time to leave work behind. The good manager leaves time to do both.

*Dr. Bruce Weinstein is the public speaker and consultant known as The Ethics Guy. He writes the ethics column for BusinessWeek.com, and his latest book is, "Is It Still Cheating If I Don't Get Caught?" (Macmillan/Roaring Brook Press), which shows teens how to resolve the ethical dilemmas they face. How ethical are **\*you\***? Take Dr. Weinstein's quiz at [TheEthicsGuy.com](#).*

SNPA eBulletin 5-21-09