



life vs. work

There's your job, and there's the rest of your life. Somewhere in between, your health and happiness hang in the balance. *By Lisa Lupo*

It's not easy to maintain a healthy balance between work and home. In fact, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reports that most of us—some 75 percent of U.S. workers—believe we face more on-the-job stress today than did workers of the previous generation.

As a collision repair shop leader, you not only have the task of maintaining a healthy balance in your own life, you're responsible for helping your employees find equilibrium between their work time and personal time, too. Trouble is, it's not always easy to know when that balance is off. "If people are not mindful of changes in their physical and emotional health, they build a tolerance for pain," says Marcy Tieger, consultant for Symphony Advisors in Irvine, Calif. And that can lead to very bad things.

"[Culturally,] we have developed a threshold for discomfort," she says. We've learned to go through the days with too little sleep, too much stress and a diet of nutritionally bankrupt food. The killer? "You don't realize it until your first heart attack."

Balance might be easier to attain if we could all just, say, hire a staff of cooks, housecleaners, personal assistants and personal trainers. But a more reasonable first step can be taken right there at the shop: Hire good employees, and treat them like family.

EMPLOYEE TRUST

Geralynn Kottschade owns and operates Jerry's Auto Body Shop in Mankato, Minn., with her husband, Jerry. Losing a long-time, valued employee to a massive heart attack 11 years ago made her take a hard look at her own work-life balance.

Right after his death, she says, "I took over and wanted to make sure that no one else worked that way again." Before she knew it, she was doing the same thing to herself. "One day I looked in the mirror and said, 'I have to stop; I have to start trusting the people who work for me,'" she says. "I had really put myself in harm's way."



A FAMILY AFFAIR: Geralynn and Jerry Kottschade, owners of Jerry's Auto Body Shop in Mankato, Minn., place a premium on family time—for themselves and their employees.

Trusting your employees is essential to work-life balance for a business owner, Tieger says. “To actually have a life away from the shop, you have to know the shop can operate without you.” That means hiring good people, and then letting them do their thing. Without that, you run the risk of feeling that you’ve got to be on the clock all the time. “And if you need to be there all the time, you will be working a 65- to 70-hour work week,” Tieger says.

No question there: That’s a life out of balance.

MUTUAL RESPECT

Trust, respect and boundaries are also critical between co-owners, particularly for husband-and-wife teams. Lillian Maimone owns Marco’s Auto Body in Monterey Park, Calif., with her husband, Marco. Their business includes five shops, four drop-off points and a staff of 175. The separation of work and home is essential to their success, she says.

At work, the couple takes on the air of colleagues rather than that of spouses. “We almost act like two separate department heads with mutual respect,” Maimone says. Having observed other husband-and-wife teams in the industry, she explains, “couples have difficulty when they collide with each other.” Too many are obsessed with self-pride, and they lack confidence in each other’s abilities, she says. Couples seem to end up undermining one another and trying to control each other’s work—even meddling outside their areas of expertise. “I know I’m not good in the areas that Marco is good in. I couldn’t do what he does.”

When the couple leaves the shop, they leave the business behind for the night. “We don’t talk about work, no matter what,” she says. “We eat dinner, watch ‘Frazier,’ and have a glass of wine or a cup of hot tea.” If there’s work to be discussed, she says, it has to wait until the morning.

INDIVIDUAL BALANCE

While it’s true that a proper work-life balance can make for a longer, happier life, Tieger says, it’s not the case that there’s only one way to attain that precious balance. The differing definition of balance is obvious at DCR Systems Accident Repair Centers in Mento, Ohio.

Chief Operating Officer Lauren Angie and Chief Financial Officer Cheryl Boswell have both attained a satisfying sense of equilibrium—in significantly different ways.

Angie’s passion is her job. “I dream it. I wake up with new ideas. I get very passionate and emotional over it,” she says. Her priority is her work, but she’s careful not to let it overtake her life. She emphasizes the quality of the time she spends with her husband and two boys, one of whom is in college and the other in high school. And she makes time for competitive horse riding—“my release.”

“From the moment [the boys] were born,” Angie recalls, “I went right back to work.” She emphasizes that was a conscious decision, rather than a necessity. To keep work in check, her family’s life has always been highly organized and scheduled, with the evening and weekend hours dedicated to her family. Through the years, Angie says, her family has undergone various evaluations. The consensus has always been that “there’s happiness there because the parents are doing what they’re happiest at,” she says. “It is truly the quality of the time, not the quantity.”

Boswell is just as passionate about DCR, but with a 5 year old and 2-year-old twins, she prefers to spend more time at home. Boswell came to DCR



DCR’s BALANCE: Lauren Angie and family enjoy a day by the water (above). Cheryl Boswell (right), with her kids and husband.

a couple months after the twins were born, and about a year later, realized she needed to spend more time with her family. So, Boswell’s work schedule was adjusted, allowing her to leave early on Thursdays and Fridays when work permits so she can pick up the kids from

school, interact with their teachers and have time with her family.

EMPLOYEE BALANCE

Providing such flexibility is one way that employers can help workers maintain balance. That’s an ideal DCR has made an effort to accommodate. “It’s something we work out with the individual and their situation,” Boswell says. “We really try to accommodate people and make sure we take care of them as well.”

To provide more balance for all employees, DCR has implemented a cutting-edge lean process and schedule, creating a process-controlled environment. It’s based on a team approach, Boswell says. “The process owns the vehicle, the person does not.” Pay is based on an hourly rate, rather than the typical industry flat-rate. Some DCR shops operate on a 10-hour/4-day schedule, and others have an 8-hour/5-day work week. In both cases, techs work less with the structured hours and hourly pay.

For those on the 4-day schedule, the employees get three days off each week, and a rotation is set up so that every fourth or fifth week, techs end up with a five-day break. The break includes a Sunday, when the shop is always closed.

For those on the 5-day model, workers count on a set schedule with days that end promptly at 4:30pm, as opposed to traditional shops where “managers are there until 9pm, and maybe weekends,



8 ideas for better balance

trying to close a job,” Boswell says.

Flexibility is further enhanced by the company’s nontraditional work process. “Our process-centered environment does not have tool boxes” Angie says. Rather, the company supplies point-of-use tooling, point-of-use equipment and employee cross-training. “It’s easy to move resources when there’s a need,” she says.

Jerry’s Auto Body also allows employees to have flexibility in the hours they keep. Family time is considered to be of utmost importance. “We want to make sure they get to their children’s events,” Kottschade says. The company hosts family events, too, such as a recent couples’ baby shower. And when Kottschade notices someone working ridiculous amounts of time, she encourages them to back off.

Marco’s Auto Body offers flexible working hours, too, but Maimone sees the total package—a good work environment, career progression and full benefits—as every bit as important to employees today. “It’s like taking care of family,” she says. “We try to give them good quality of life; we talk about that a lot.”

BENEFITS IN RETURN

Adding employee benefits certainly can affect the financial side of your business, but there’s a grand return for your effort. Employees who feel that their company really cares about them will, in turn, work harder for the company, Maimone has noticed. “If you care

#1. Get outta town. Several short vacations are more beneficial than one big trip, research suggests. The benefits of a long vacation can fade faster than your tropical tan, whereas shorter, more frequent getaways can provide just the right amount of relaxation and renewal.

#2. Date your spouse. Husband-and-wife team Geralynn and Jerry Kottschade, owners of Jerry’s Auto Body Shop in Mankato, Minn., are following in their teen daughter’s footsteps. When she goes on a date, they do too (separately, of course!).

#3. Resist gravity. How do you know whether you’re working too hard? If you’re so tired that you can’t muster the will to get out of your chair once you’ve made it home from the shop, it’s time to make a change, Kottschade says.

#4. Get over the guilt. Reconciling the choice between working and staying home with the kids can be agonizing. Lillian Maimone, owner of Marco’s Auto Body, Monterey Park, Calif., used to stay up nights wondering whether she’d done the right thing. Her kids, now in their 20s, put it in perspective: “You were a great mom,” they say. “We had fun at daycare.”

#5. Pay your family in time. Logging hours at the shop to bring in the bucks so you can improve your family’s finances may not have the return on investment you intend, cautions Marcy Tieger, consultant for Symphony Advisors in Irvine, Calif. Teens, for instance, may appreciate spending time with you more than you realize.

#6. Empathize with your employees. Treating employees like family “is an enormous amount of work, but it’s so worth it,” Maimone says, pointing out that working with a bunch of unhappy, finger-pointing folks makes for miserable days. Keeping employees happy means noticing, and taking care of, their non-work-related needs. “Sometimes a guy is hurting for money, so you slip him some cash and say, ‘Take your wife to dinner,’” she says. “Or if an employee is looking sad, tell him, ‘Go home and spend some time with your kids.’”

#7. Give a free day. Instead of holiday or year-end bonuses, consider giving employees additional time off. Today’s employees are inclined to recognize the value of time over cash, Tieger says.

#8. Stay cool. “As the book says, don’t sweat the small stuff,” Maimone says. “When you stress yourself out, no one wins.”

about them, they are more loyal to the business; they take care of the company more. You can’t write that into a [standard operating procedure] or pound that into an employee.”

Such employee loyalty often equates to employee retention. A majority of managers surveyed by Right Management estimated that, in terms of recruitment cost, training, lost productivity and severance, it takes one to two years to recoup the cost to replace an employee who doesn’t work out. “People don’t usually leave a job for money alone,” Tieger says. “How they are treated is a significant factor.” That seems to be especially true of younger employees. “Generation Y

watched us and said, ‘I don’t want to be like Mom and Dad. I want to have time with my kids.’”

Attaining lasting balance is no small task, and sometimes it’s easier to do for others than it is to do for ourselves. Investing in work-life balance for your employees will likely pay you back with staff loyalty, increased productivity and employee retention. And that, in turn, is a tremendous step toward attaining your own equilibrium. Your family—at home and at work—will thank you for it. ⚙️

Lisa Lupo frequently contributes to FenderBender. Previously, she wrote about Gigi Walker’s successful ownership of Walker’s Auto Body.

