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Relax, Recharge, Renew

Beat burnout by focusing on quality of life.

Burt Woolf, founder and CEO of the Center for Quality of Life (www.C4QL.org), teaches leaders that developing a personal vision can improve their quality of life and help combat burnout.
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Find the fuel for
personal renewal.

keeping UP

EVER FIND YOURSELF WONDERING WHAT happened to that idealistic, enthusiastic person you were in college? Or humming the Peggy Lee tune “Is That All There Is?” Have things that you’ve always considered challenging become a series of headaches?

“Nonprofit professionals—including many association executives—face comparatively low salaries, high turnover rates, and the constant search for solutions in an incredibly turbulent world,” says Burt Woolf, founder and CEO of the Center for Quality of Life, Amherst, Massachusetts. “Couple those things with a career that might be perceived as second-tier and is little understood by others, and it’s no surprise that you find stress and burnout among association leaders.”

In Woolf’s opinion, the challenge is not getting to the top but maintaining your identity and quality of life once you get there. “Association leaders tend to have a fundamental desire to make a difference,” he says. “Burnout occurs when you’ve been so stripped of your quality-of-life experiences that you become pessimistic, cynical, and disenchanted. Thwarted intentions, unexpressed communication, and unmet expectations lead to the kind of stress that diminishes your resilience.”

BY LINDA C. CHANDLER
PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC POGGENPOHL

Woolf’s career in cultural planning and community development (including seven years as an association CEO at the Massachusetts Cultural Alliance and the Creative Education Foundation) convinced him of the power of the total life experience. “I’ve seen the quality of life improve in communities when local energies focus on arts projects, health coalitions, and downtown revitalizations. For leaders, transformation in quality of life occurs on a personal level, too. But only when they look to their own inner resources.”

Woolf conducts classes and retreats to help leaders create a quality-of-life context for their work. He calls these learning events

transformative education because they teach people to tap into their natural intuitive wisdom, resulting in what he calls *effortless leadership*. (For more detailed information, go to www.C4QL.org) Effortless leadership does not mean that being a leader is easy. Clearly, it's not. But Woolf believes that if you do the inner work up front—developing an understanding of your leadership role, articulating a personal vision, valuing yourself and your relationships with others, and so forth—you will reach the place where you exercise control of your life, rather than allow life to control you.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT spoke with three association executives who exemplify Woolf's theory of effortless leadership. While each faces his or her share of challenges, their approaches for dealing with them offer insights into new ways of fueling personal balance and avoiding burnout.

Define your personal vision

Achieving life balance starts with having a personal philosophy or world view through which all challenges and events are filtered. Essentially you choose how you will perceive everything that happens. How you respond to events is a reflection of your vision. Vision may be a by-product of upbringing, formal education, or life-altering circumstances.

Adopting a management philosophy; establishing a personal way of being.

Jon R. Roth, CAE, executive director of the California Dental Association Foundation, Sacramento, says that total quality management, "a business fad of the past," influenced his vision. "I was formally trained in TQM and became a certified trainer, presenting the concept to thousands of executives. I really liked the principles, attitudes, and leadership development skills I learned. I found that those ideologies flowed easily into my personal life, and the culture of balance and positive leadership became how I chose to lead my life." He adds, "The one great piece of literary work that has helped me the most is the Bible, which I believe teaches you how to live your life in balance—in service to God, family, and friends."

Beginning with early grounding. Ken Hutton, executive vice president of the Wood Machinery Manufacturers of America, Philadelphia, points to two years of graduate business school education at the University of Virginia's Darden School as the source for his life vision. "A first-year course about organizational behavior was a big part of my development in thinking about work-life balance," he says. "And just as important was the day-to-day interaction with professors and their families and a group of motivated peers experiencing the rigors of business school, yet finding time to enjoy life by playing hard in activities that included classmates, spouses, and significant others. I participate in five-year reunions and always come away from those contacts feeling reenergized but grounded in what is really important in life—my family and friends. Without those two touchstones, what I do for a living loses meaning."

Gathering external perspective. "I've been to several seminars and have read several books about organizing life and work, picking up bits here and there," says Dittie Guise, general manager of the Greater Columbus Convention Center, Ohio, managed by SMG, a Philadelphia-based management services provider. "A few years ago, I read a simple little book called *The Precious Present* (1984, Doubleday). It focused on living in today. The idea is that you can look at the past, but you can't change it, only learn from it; you can plan for the future, but you can't be there. Enjoy life *now*—that was a strong message for me."

Embrace your members' causes

The concept of *servant leadership* espoused by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 essay "The Servant as Leader," can be a source of motivation, blending vision and expectations, says Woolf.

Case in point: Two years ago, Hutton was drawn into a groundswell of political activism sparked by his members. "Some of these people were second- and third-generation entrepreneurs, owners of family manufacturing businesses, who feared for the future of manufacturing in the United States," he says. "They were

getting the brush-off from their state and federal officials when they brought up off-shore manufacturing issues. They transferred their passion and energy to me."

Hutton focused the attention of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), Washington, D.C., on the issue during a council meeting in July 2002. He was asked to head a task force to make recommendations for specific regulatory and legislative changes. He also led a fundraising campaign to support NAM's efforts, including the publication of two white papers that are being circulated to employees, elected representatives, and the media.

"During the process, there has been this pervasive feeling that we are achieving something, making a difference," Hutton says. Fernley and Fernley, the association management company where Hutton serves as vice president of associations, handles six other associations tied to manufacturing. "I've had the opportunity to help educate others at Fernley and Fernley, too, and that's gratifying. The challenge of new opportunities is the sticking power in a leadership position. It's easy to get caught in the humdrum activities and burn out."

Focus on people

Woolf cautions that relationship issues can drain your energy. Chasing the approval of others, holding grudges, and trying to change others are no-win situations for leaders, he says, but relationships built on mutual compassion and authentic communication are the foundation of joy, self-worth, and meaningful work.

"People you've worked with must accept you at the next level," says Guise, who, during an eight-year period, moved from vice president of convention marketing and services to assistant general manager and then to her current position as general manager of the Greater Columbus Convention Center. "How you position yourself is important. I've moved up and been able to stay here because I'm still able to accomplish new things without moving [to another organization]."

Appreciating her team is an important aspect of Guise's philosophy. "I believe in treating people as you want to be treated, even in the little things like returning phone calls promptly. I speak to every person as I leave the building each day. They

are as important as I am to our success. My assistant has been with me going on six years and is only the second one I've had at this facility," she says. "Treat people right and you get back tenfold. Don't ask them to do anything you wouldn't do yourself."

Maintaining relationships with the clients of her facility also contributes to Guise's job satisfaction. "Staying 100 percent immersed in the politics of this job can't sustain you that long," she says. "I make a point to stay in touch with the people who matter—our customers. It reminds me why I got into this business in the first place."

Choose to see the bright side

Roth of the California Dental Association Foundation directs programs that provide charitable dental care. "In our state, 12 million people lack adequate access to dental care. If you dwell on the obvious challenge in that number, you can get mired down in the negative, so we keep our focus on the positive, on the things we are doing to make a difference," he says.

Roth's office walls are covered with photos of people the foundation has helped. "Putting faces in a real context transcends the everyday work we do. My approach to both professional and private life is that I don't need the spotlight. But I need to be making a difference, whether it's in the form of filing a grant application or making a phone call."

Moving forward with purpose requires being unfettered by unconscious judgments and attitudes, says Woolf. "Once you are truly aware of what's going on inside you; you can then assert action that responds to the situation and is in alignment with your true needs."

Choose community activities that reflect your passions

Says Woolf, "Community is the number one quality-of-life experience outside yourself. Involvement with caring people and organizations outside your workaday world reinforces your true identity and provides additional support systems."

Guise, for example, serves on the boards of two service organizations—the local

American Red Cross chapter and After-School All-Stars Columbus, a program for inner-city kids. She is active in several other nonprofit and professional groups as well. "I like to mentor," she says, "but I weigh my commitments, determining what's good for my company and for me. I'm against being involved in name only."

Says Roth, "Because of my wife's experience with breast cancer, we participate as a family in American Cancer Society and Susan G. Komen Foundation events. I [also] serve on the board of the Sportsmen's Legacy Foundation, an organization involved with habitat and wildlife conservation. All these things offer different benefits and personal rewards, and they're how I get my batteries recharged for work."

Recognize the mind-body connection

One thing that Hutton, Guise, and Roth have in common is a commitment to physical activity and its importance to their life balance. All have been athletes since they were teenagers.

Guise goes to the gym almost every morning before work and plays golf whenever she gets a chance. "When the body is sluggish, the way you think is sluggish," she says. "When you feel better with yourself, you feel better with the world."

"I have a love-hate relationship with running," says Roth. He's up early to jog three miles around his neighborhood four or five times a week. "Physical exertion blows the mind open and prepares it for mental exertion. I like the outdoors—fishing, hiking, getting away from phones, pagers, and faxes."

For Hutton, physical exertion comes in the form of rowing. "It's my mental release at the end of the day, and I have to do it several times a week. It's one of my passions," he says.

Keep work in perspective

"I give 120 percent to work Monday through Friday, but the touchstone of my philosophy is that when I'm home, I'm on family time. The time and experiences with my children are irreplaceable, and my actions are important to them," Roth says. "I

inherited a great work ethic from my dad and my *family glue* from my mother. I don't work or spend time on the computer if the kids are awake."

Guise keeps work in perspective by refusing to waste time worrying. "I do not worry about *what ifs*. If I have a situation, I'll do my utmost to resolve it, but I will not worry about it."

"At my company, we believe we can have fun while we're working," Hutton says. "We accept mistakes as a part of life. Just don't make the same ones repeatedly or you aren't learning anything. We also participate as a company in community activities, donating to holiday food drives and giving used computers to a local junior high school."

Appreciate the bigger picture

"Look at those who have succeeded," says Woolf. "It isn't a strategy, but [there is often] some sense of connectedness or a belief that they are flowing with the universe that inspires their mission and purpose. Find your intuitive self, and you will strike that chord. Harmony produces contentment and resilience."

"We don't operate in a vacuum," agrees Roth. "I believe in long-term goals and objectives for all areas of life. Mine are actually sketched out on paper, and I keep them in a box. I have a personal vision, a professional vision, and even a family vision. To that extent, I'd say I control my own destiny. But I believe a plan is in place in a larger sense. I have faith in what is to be ultimately."

Hutton, whose wife has also had breast cancer, adds, "My wife's health battle has taught us what's necessary in the grand scheme of things. We've learned you climb life's mountains one rock at a time." He continues, "There are moments in rowing, when the crew is working in sync, that the boat just lifts out of the water and you can hear the bubbles underneath—it's transcendent. That's a good life analogy. It doesn't always go well, but when you work collectively, you move forward and grasp fully those rare times that are so rewarding."

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