

Seeking Balance and Small Progress



by Christine Osvald-Mruz



In an article that first appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of the *Women Lawyers Journal*, a publication of the National Association of Women Lawyers, **Christine Osvald-Mruz**, Co-Chair of STRIDES, Advancing Women in Business, discusses her experience with the challenges of work-life balance.

There are mornings when, deep in thought or distracted, I get 10 minutes into my commute after dropping off the kids before I realize that I am still listening to "The Wiggles." As a partner in a law firm and a mother of three small children (ages 6, 3 and 1), I am never bored. The velocity of my life at present is challenging. I am constantly striving for balance. My driving principle is the conviction that there must be a way to be devoted to my career and to my family -- to be the kind of lawyer I want to be and the kind of mother I want to be.

Moving between the world of work and the world of home and children presents challenges. Billing time in six-minute increments, coupled with trying to work as efficiently as possible, is about as far as one can get from "kid time." My kids really would prefer to play trains/cars/buses/rockets on the bathroom floor than brush their teeth, and see no particular urgency to getting dressed, fed and out of the house in the morning. I have to make adjustments when I am switching between the worlds, such as clearing my purse in advance of a client meeting so that an errant pacifier does not drop out when I reach for my business cards.

Work - Life Parallels

At the same time, there are parallels between how I manage my work and how I manage my home life. In each case, I first take stock of what needs to be done, prioritize, deal with the emergencies, and take care of things in the "critical path" (that otherwise would block forward movement). I then seek to make progress on other items. In the case of my work on corporate transactions, such as mergers and acquisitions, the "emergency" may be a phone call that must take place that day to resolve an open issue. Critical path items may be following up with my team and/or the client to enable them to move forward on tasks ranging from tax analysis to document production. In the case of my home life, "emergencies" may be that tomorrow's show and tell must be "something that grows" and that we are dangerously behind on laundry. Critical path items may be that we have to make an appointment with the dentist (or doctor, vet, or car repair shop-fill in the blank for your own situation) and place an online order for a birthday gift.

I also consciously decide in each case where to make trade-offs. I work a reduced schedule (compared to the staggering number of hours many lawyers work), trading some potential income for time. "Part time" is a misnomer; rather, there is flexibility and fluidity to my schedule, which is still substantial. To manage my workload, I limit the number of matters I take on at one time, and more frequently play the role of supervisor than of draftsman. I also seek matters that will not inexorably require incessant, prolonged, round-the-clock attention. This stage of my career does not lend itself to running IPOs, but I can and do lead other sophisticated transactions.

The “Compromise” Question

I am unwilling to compromise on the quality of my work. It is important to me to bear real responsibility at work and to be diligent, thorough and effective. I enjoy the intellectual stimulation of my work and feel inspired to develop relationships with clients and to learn and grow professionally. I also make it a priority to contribute to the life of the firm, including serving on committees, mentoring colleagues, and organizing networking events.

My driving principle is the conviction that there must be a way to be devoted to my career and to my family -- to be the kind of lawyer I want to be and the kind of mother I want to be.

In our dual career household, my husband and I have decided to allow ourselves some room for imperfection. Our home is “decorated” with toys, frequently interspersed with inside-out boys’ socks. Some nights we have cereal for dinner; other nights we join the kids in eating dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets. By the end of each week, we typically have a giant collection of mail, newspapers and kids’ art projects to face.

One area in which we do not compromise at home, however, is in our attention to and affection for our children. The kids have a relatively elaborate bedtime routine, in which we reserve time for reading, talking, hugging, occasional tantrums and the inevitable trucks/airplanes/construction vehicles on the bathroom floor. We relish the differences in our kids’ personalities and delight in the funny things they say and do. We become excited as they reach developmental milestones and seek ways we can teach them, encourage them and comfort them.

A Fragile Balance

To the extent that I have balance, it is a fragile one. My husband and I have grown accustomed to the 3:00 a.m. comparison of schedules as we discover that one of the kids is sick. (“What does your day look like? I could cover the morning but have a meeting in the afternoon”). My husband has grown accustomed to the 4:00 p.m. phone call/e-mail in which I ask “Could you possibly pick up the kids today in case I need to work late?” All it takes is one feverish child or one abrupt issue in a deal to shake up our routine and force us into “crisis mode.” With three kids, illnesses are often staggered, resulting in greater cumulative disruption. The exigencies of corporate transactions result in intense crunch times at work during which I rely on my tireless but tired husband to pick up the slack at home. While even our “crisis mode” has become somewhat routine (an alternate, non-preferable routine), we depend upon these periods being relatively short-lived.

I could not even try to lead my life as it is currently structured without support. My husband is a full partner in all that we do. Our extended family and friends provide help in various ways, from weekend visits by the grandparents to emotional support. Teachers at day care, school and an after-school program help care for our sons. We rely on others to help clean our house, walk the dog, deliver the dry cleaning and mow the lawn. My firm has seen me through three maternity leaves (making me a partner shortly after my second maternity leave) and has enabled me to work a reduced schedule for the last six years. My colleagues help serve clients as a team and my secretary in particular helps facilitate my work.

Within the framework of the busy life I have chosen, I find that the one quality I need most is patience. Often, at work or at home, I have to be satisfied with small progress in lieu of major accomplishments. Sometimes I feel conflicted, sometimes I feel just plain exhausted, and sometimes, in a justifying moment, I feel triumphant.