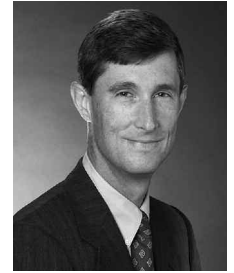


Do You Dare Ask Your Family for Feedback on Work-Life Balance?

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When was the last time that you asked a member of your family for feedback on how you are balancing the demands of work and family life? I'm embarrassed to admit it's been a long time. So at the end of our recent family vacation, I asked my wife Katie and my son Jamie what they thought.

I started with Jamie. He now has 20 years of experience putting up with the demands of my professional career. He started his reply carefully. He said he was glad that I enjoyed my work. He appreciated that the work was important even though he had trouble understanding much of what I do. When Jamie was a little boy, he accompanied me when I visited Sankey Williams to talk about taking over the reigns as *JGIM* editor. Back then, Jamie wanted to know what an editor did. I think he understands the journal work better than most of the other work I've done.

I had to encourage Jamie to be more critical. He responded by saying that I always seem to be doing too much. He is aware of my struggle to juggle research, teaching, clinical practice, journal editing, and SGIM leadership responsibilities. He astutely observed that the struggle is intensified by two traits—being “too nice” (i.e. not saying no often enough) and never doing anything “half-assed.” He wondered why I couldn't get away from work earlier or more often if I am the one in charge. He also expressed concern about my frequently working late in a part of town that still has more than its share of violent crime. Over-

all, his feedback was not as critical as I had anticipated.

That helped give me the courage to ask Katie. If you know Katie, you know that she's not one to hold back on what she thinks. I told her I was thinking about writing this column, so she asked whether I really wanted to hear all her thoughts. I said yes. She started nicely by saying she was glad that I enjoy my work. She also has enjoyed the opportunities we've had through my work to meet interesting people and go to interesting places. Both Katie and Jamie loved Barcelona, for example. But too often she feels held hostage by my job. Too often she feels that family commitments come second to work. One of my worst habits is coming home late, putting more pressure on her to deal with issues and responsibilities at home. That makes her feel like I think my job is more important than her job. Like Jamie, she worries about me getting home safely when it's late. What particularly troubles her is that I frequently seem preoccupied by work demands. She feels that it impairs my ability to give full attention to almost anything and that it limits my ability to completely enjoy other things like vacations and to fully participate and give attention to other parts of my life. In Katie's words, “I feel you are never free of it.” Having a demanding and rewarding job of her own as a fertility specialist has helped her feel less resentful than she otherwise would feel. When she has had stressful problems in her clinical practice, she has appreciated my ability to under-

stand the issues and provide appropriate support. She understands the challenges of working at a place like Johns Hopkins, having been on the faculty in the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics before she entered private practice. She is proud of what I've been able to accomplish and amazed that I could survive 26 years at Hopkins.

SGIM has a long-standing commitment to promoting work-life balance and an interest group on personal-professional balance. Members of the Interest Group have led numerous workshops at regional and national meetings. *JGIM* has supported efforts to improve work-life balance by publishing many articles on the topic. Indeed, the June issue of *JGIM* includes a qualitative study of work-life balance issues from the perspective of faculty clinician-researchers and their mentors.^{1,2} The study reveals five major themes: 1) the importance of work-life balance for contemporary physician-researchers; 2) how gender roles and spousal dynamics make these issues more challenging for women; 3) the role of mentoring in this area; 4) the impact of institutional policies and practices intended to improve work-life balance; and 5) stereotypes and stigmas associated with use of these policies and practices. A few of the study's quoted comments caught my eye. One woman said, “I'm in the first generation of people that refuse to do it the way all the older men have done it who were successful.” Another woman said, “The men I'm working with don't ever perceive or vocalize

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family issues are a problem." One male mentor observed that "as a male in particular, you have to be compassionate because you can't pretend that you understand all of it because you don't as a male." I hate to admit that I'm one of the older men now, but the comments reinforced my belief that both male and female academic leaders must provide mentorship in helping junior fac-

ulty and trainees balance work with their personal lives. Leaders sharing their own experiences will help, warts and all. As you can see, my family has given me feedback that will help me do better. I dare you to ask your family how you can do better.

References

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