

Finding the Right Balance



Virginia Society of
Certified Public
Accountants

KnowledgeNOW speaker: Get your life in harmony

Everyone in the accounting field (or any other) is familiar with the term “work-life balance.” It’s a perk that every company trumpets on its website, to the point that it comes standard in many industries. Two of the Day One speakers at the VSCPA’s KnowledgeNOW conference in Reston had their own take on the concept.

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Business, Balance and Bliss

Opening speaker Amy Vetter, CPA, used the phrase “work-life harmony” in her session, “Business, Balance and Bliss: How the B³ Method can Transform Your Career and Life.” Vetter, a bass player, drew inspiration from her music career in developing that concept.

“I did that because sometimes work-life balance becomes this stressful term in our lives. Do we have enough of it?” she asked. “Do we look at others and see that they have it mastered and we can’t get there? The research behind work-life balance shows that there is no amount of time that’s the right amount of time. It’s not about the quantity, but the quality of what you do.”

Vetter, a yoga practitioner, used the Sanskrit word *satchinanda* to describe the titular concept of bliss. The word essentially means that you are aware that you exist. It’s not happiness, but the maintenance of happiness and the awareness of how you feel and how you experience the world around you.



Amy Vetter

That awareness of one’s own feelings is vital because of the constant changes life throws at us. We might be in a good place, but a subtle (or not-so-subtle) change can throw us off our axes and necessitate an adjustment on our end. The practice of maintaining our happiness and self-worth is what Vetter sees as true bliss.

“Too many times in our work day, we let life just come at us, rather than being aware that we exist, that we control some of our day,” she said. “Bliss is the maintenance of happiness. It’s not something that you can ever win. What it is is becoming more aware of how you feel and how you experience the world around you.”

This seems like as good a place as any to lay out the three Bs in the B³ Method: Business + Balance = Bliss. Business refers to the stressful situations we find ourselves in every day, while balance is how we deal with those situations and square them with the rest of our lives.

Finding that bliss requires understanding why you do what you do. It’s knowing why you’re a CPA, what you want to do with it and aligning your career with who you are.

“What happens in our careers isn’t necessarily giving up being a CPA,” Vetter said. “It’s pivoting what we do with the expertise that we have so we can align it with what’s important to us as we’re getting older. We think about what that master plan is, and instead of quitting, we’re pivoting.”

The success of those pivots relies on being true to oneself and honest with colleagues about priorities and what we’re feeling.

“Too many times in our accounting department, everyone’s going this alone and not thinking about what’s going on with other people,” Vetter said. ▶

“When we share that, we’re more authentic and become better leaders.”

Vetter draws on her musical background to help inform her own balance — not just playing herself, but helping musicians and artists in her own practice.

“How do I pivot what I do to encompass that? As a CPA, if I work with creatives and artists, it doesn’t feel like work anymore,” she said. “I love the work that they do and I love helping them improve their businesses. How do you take what’s important to you and change your work to include that? You think about how you can work this into your life now.”

Pursuing other passions as a hobby can also help, and it can pay dividends in your career even outside of providing balance. Treating the brain — and its left and right hemispheres — as a muscle to be exercised helps us bring a greater range of thinking to work projects.

“As adults, we start losing that fun and that creativity, and we start losing the process of how we bring innovation into work,” Vetter said. “When we start testing that muscle outside of work, our executive decision skills get better.”

She added: “We have to get back to this beginner’s mind. When you think about a child going through school, every single day they’re going through all these different topics, taking in new information, not knowing if they’re going to be good at it or not. When we become adults, we are experts and we stop learning about these topics and start shutting off these areas of the brain. We have to turn those neural pathways back

on.”

The main takeaway from the session: Whatever you’re doing, be intentional about it. If you want people’s attention, don’t let them interrupt you. If you’re in a meeting with someone, listen to them and smile back. If you want real career advice, be intentional about the people you ask — create your own advisory team, as Vetter puts it.

Perhaps most applicable to finding one’s balance and bliss, a mantra is a great way to be intentional. Find an affirmation that fits what you want to become, repeat it and live by it.

“Mantras are ways to shift our energy and set an intention for the way that we want to show up during the day,” Vetter said. “Maybe we want to be more positive during the day, but the day starts happening and we start losing our sense of self. Mantras help you look and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got to shift.’” ■

Diversity, Inclusion and Connection

The afternoon of the first day of KnowledgeNOW brought a session on diversity and inclusion from two employees of BDO USA, a firm that’s had some well-documented success in that area. Aaron Coleman, BDO’s regional human resources director, had another take on the work-life issue, referring to it as “work-life fit” for similar reasons to those Vetter cited. And he said it was a major factor in both employee engagement and retention.

“Engagement is that emotional connection, that ability, that want

to put forth that effort,” Coleman said. “You can retain people who are completely disengaged, and you can have engaged people you don’t retain for various reasons. Maybe it’s career path. Maybe they switch professions. Maybe the career path isn’t moving fast enough.

“They don’t always go hand in hand, and that’s what makes it so difficult. Sometimes you have very, very talented people who just want to go do something else.”

Laurie De Armond, CPA, assurance partner at BDO, talked about diversity and inclusion (and the efforts to increase both) and defined the terms thusly: Diversity is being invited to the party and inclusion is being asked to dance. (She freely admitted cribbing the idea from a presentation she saw from a Wells Fargo executive.)

“Many organizations have policies where we’re hopefully not excluding people from being hired, but are we really creating a culture of inclusion where everybody has a voice and feels comfortable expressing themselves and being heard?” she asked. “I think it’s in creating an inclusive environment where we don’t shut people out that is really the power of a diverse workforce.”

Making sure people feel included has well-documented positive effects on retention. For all the disruptive changes to the accounting world in recent years, the most common reasons for leaving an employer are still the same as ►



Laurie De Armond

they used to be:

- Relationship with direct supervisor
- Career growth opportunities
- Interesting work
- A reasonable level of work-life balance
- Quality people, tools and processes

“Most things haven’t changed. People have varying reasons for leaving a firm,” Coleman said. “Number one is still having a positive relationship with your direct supervisor. You’ve got to have the trust, and it has to be mutual. If you don’t have that positive relationship, you’re going to lose people very quickly.”

The second item on that list is a major factor in retention in what Coleman calls “horizontal careers,” where employees can expand their skill sets without leaving the firm. Work-life fit, as Coleman describes it, is another key perk that allows employees to hold on to what’s important to them outside the office.

“Five years ago, every organization was marketing this as an attraction tool to get people to work for them,” he said. “It was on all the websites, and now it’s standard. If you don’t have some kind of flexibility, something of that going on for yourself or in your organization, you’re going to lose some people.”

Technological advances are a double-edged sword in terms of retention. Remote work programs can add to work-life balance (or fit, or harmony, or the term of your choice), but the lack of face-to-face time they engender can make it

harder to build the necessary trust.

For all the talk about millennials and subsequent generations being digital natives, face-to-face conversations remain the preferred method of communication in both personal and professional matters.

“If face-to-face continues to be such a driver of connectivity, we’re going to have to be more creative in the way we do it,” Coleman said.

For all that’s the same, there are generational differences among employees in any industry. While turnover in public accounting isn’t a new phenomenon, younger employees are more likely to switch careers relatively early on.

“What I’m seeing is their ability and willingness, in a very short period of time, to decide that being in the accounting field is not for them,” De Armond said. “They just want to try something entirely different. A couple of our relatively new hires recently, between 15 and 18 months, decided they weren’t leaving public accounting and going to other firms. They were deciding that they wanted to go pursue their dream of sports marketing or living on a farm.”

BDO’s response to its turnover issues started as a local issue, with individual offices deciding what issues were most important to local employees. It turned into a firm-wide effort to create a culture that values diversity, to the point of hiring a chief people officer tasked in part with ensuring that culture is protected.

But true to the research Coleman cited, it’s not just the sweeping corporate mandates that keep people from leaving a company. Change has to come on an individual level.

“A lot of it wasn’t a program that we rolled out. A lot of it is subtle, one-on-one conversations that have taken place to try to get decision-makers to think differently,” De Armond said. “Until I was one of the partners in the room making decisions about certain things, it never occurred to me how important it was to have an advocate. The decision-makers have to buy in and be open-minded.”

Among the larger changes BDO made was an increase in flexibility in an effort to keep women from leaving the firm. That push wound up having influence with men and women alike, but the subtle, personal factors wound up having a greater impact.

“The interesting part when we took a deeper dive into the research was that it was about career development, career readiness and getting them into the rooms with the right people,” Coleman said. “We could have created crazy flex plans for people and still not gotten the results. We would have missed the mark.”

Each year, BDO measures employee engagement with a survey and uses the results to drive programming. The results tend to cluster around the following themes:

- High degree of trust between leadership and employees
- Employees understand the factors that drive their career path
- Employees have recently received recognition for their work

No matter what group you’re targeting in your retention push, ►

it's important to define your objectives. That BDO's women's program happened to resonate across the employee pool was a happy accident, but targeted programs will have a better chance at getting the results you want.

"What is the goal at your organization or your firm? Is it that you're trying to reduce turnover at a certain level? Is it that you're trying to make more women partners or leaders at your organization?" De Armond said. "We wanted to define what the goal is at each level. We did push the needle on that attrition between men and women at the senior and manager level, and it is more even now." ■

Controlling Your Unconscious Bias

Radio host and human resources expert Lorne Epstein looked back to De Armond and Coleman's session in the last general session of the day, "How to Control Your Unconscious Bias." His session featured a great deal of group work, including having attendees list their "circle of trust," identify several key traits of the people on that list and look for commonalities and potential blind spots.

Why are those blind spots so important? The unconscious decisions we make based on factors like race, gender and age can have very real repercussions in the careers of our employees.

"In our workplace, a lot of us are in leadership roles," Epstein said. "A lot of us have power at work, and our job is to dole out that power, dole out goodies and punishments. Anyone here prefer to give goodies to people you trust? I mean time off, money, promotions, maybe exposure to a special project. All of those decisions are based on who you trust."

Epstein quoted the Persian poet Rumi in discussing building relationships with a diverse group of colleagues: "Meet me in the garden of our mutual trust." In other words, professionals need to find common ground and have discussions in a place where trust goes both ways.

"It's nice when you meet somebody and you can trust them," Epstein said. "If you can create that at work, it's a way to deal with a lot of this stuff. This is a very intricate social problem, because it deals with human beings."

Bias, Epstein says, is impossible to eliminate. It's an extremely human trait. But the more you can move it

from the realm of the unconscious to become more conscious of it, the better you can do in mitigating its ill effects.

Bias comes from your life experiences, meaning that events from your past can prevent you from clearly seeing what's happening in the present. It's strongest when you're under stress and your amygdala, which scans for threats, is activated in your brain. When your amygdala is active, it uses mental models, informed by bias, to make quick decisions.

It's the difference between fast thinking and slow thinking, both of which are useful in different situations. Fast thinking is reflexive and operates with little to no effort. Slow thinking demands allocation of mental resources and careful attention.

A good starting point is to be suspicious of your first impression, and that extends to your natural responses when it comes to hiring. Being less quick to write off graduates of lower-ranked schools or taking a look to see if your job descriptions might be driving women away can help mitigate your unconscious bias.



Lorne Epstein

"You want to be discerning in who you hire. You want to hire people who can do a great job," Epstein said. "Can you hire people who can do that job who maybe didn't go to that college?"

Or it can be as simple as changing who you interact with at work. The more various groups within an organization interact and share experiences, the less unconscious bias will play into decisions – because leadership will be more aware of what everyone brings to the table — and the stronger the organization will grow.

"Maybe you don't talk to women at work, or talk to women under 30, or men over 60," Epstein said. "So notice that. The more you realize that, the better off your organization will be."

And while you're growing your professional circle, you're also changing your perspective by learning from people with different experiences than yours.

"The one that really bugs me is when someone says, 'Oh, they're not experiencing any discrimination,' when they're not. Just because it doesn't happen ►

to you doesn't mean it's not happening," Epstein said. "If people say it happens, it happens, and I think people are listening more. This is what happens to me in the workplace. This is what happens when I go to the store and my skin ■ a certain color, and it's wrong."

Take Advantage of Your Moment

Lou Crenshaw has decades of accounting experience under his belt, both as a partner at Grant Thornton and in his own consulting business. But he's also got a wealth of experience dealing with people even more impatient than business executives: Military brass.

Crenshaw spent nearly 40 years serving in the U.S. Navy. Combined with his business experience, that meant he spent a lot of time making presentations to Pentagon higher-ups. He passed along the lessons learned from those pitches in his session, "Your 30 Minutes of Fame."

So what are executives doing during the PowerPoint briefing you worked on so carefully? According to Crenshaw, they're most likely:

- Thinking about their last meeting
- Thinking about their next meeting
- Checking your spelling or math
- Looking ahead in the slide deck
- Doodling
- Daydreaming
- Wondering when you'll be finished

"Corporate executives are busy and you probably only get one chance with them," Crenshaw said. "This is either your job or your sale, and you only get that one chance to make that great impression."

Crenshaw urges would-be pitchmen to severely curtail their use of PowerPoint, or at least to avoid using it as a crutch. Keep your slides simple and don't be afraid to leave them behind — and no matter what, don't read them.

You also want to avoid what Crenshaw calls "weak conversations." In those, you're unfocused and rambling, and you're getting interrupted frequently. Body language is another big part of a strong presentation, particularly when you're listening. Crenshaw referred to a video he saw of one of his meetings that really drilled that particular point home.

"I didn't realize how terrible my body language was and what a terrible impression I was making," he said. "Somebody is saying something and I've got my arms crossed, I'm looking around, I'm doodling, I'm making sure my necktie is tied correctly. You watch that and you realize how rude that was and the impression you leave on that person, that you're somebody who doesn't care about that conversation."

Active listening is important — sitting on the edge of your seat and not doing weird things with your body. Keep your hands in your lap and try to avoid using your chair back for more powerful conversations.

That's part of what makes a successful presentation. Obviously, you need to go in prepared and listen actively. You should also

have a goal for the conversation and an idea of how you're going to control it.

One factor you can't always control is cell phones. While you can control your own group and tell them to leave the phones behind or at least turn them off, with your host, the best you can do is often a suggestion ahead of time.

"It's pretentious to say, 'Let me see that cell phone, buddy. Turn it off,'" Crenshaw said. "Certainly, for the people in your tribe, you tell them to turn the phones off. Hopefully you can mention tactfully to the person who scheduled the meeting, 'This is going to be important, so if there are going to be any important phone calls, let me know.'"

A subset of the "important message" category is one Crenshaw is familiar with from his military career — delivering bad news. His main takeaway: Do it in person.

"When I went to test pilot school, they teach you about delivering bad news," he said. "There are three things. No. 1: Don't lie. No. 2: Don't be funny. No. 3: Don't blurt out the truth. Most people, if you say you've got bad news, that we misjudged on the project we thought was going to bring in a ton of revenue, you have to just grin and bear it.

"Have the facts right and give them options. 'We can do this, we can do that, and we have a team standing by waiting on your decision.'" ■



Lou Crenshaw