One day to live? Your inner circle comes first

By Shashank Nigam

Last year, I attended a panel discussion on the working lifestyles of Singaporeans at a conference at the Singapore Management University. A top executive of a local bank sat on the panel, and when a student asked for his views on striking a work-life balance, this was his reply:

"Put your heart and soul into work while you are young, he said. Work hard until you are about to retire. Only then should you find time to do the things you really want and start spending time with your family."

This philosophy would supposedly help to ease us into retirement when the time comes. His views troubled me, but I did not have a good counter-suggestion – till now. I recently read Chasing Daylight by Eugene O’Kelly, the former CEO of accounting firm KPMG.

After rising to the top ranks of the accounting world, Mr O’Kelly was diagnosed with brain cancer. He was given 100 days to live. Though the book is about the writer’s impending death and how he “managed” it professionally, I felt he had clearly put forth a lesson in prioritising.

Although (or perhaps because) he did not live a very balanced life, his reflections are powerful. He wrote about a manager who came home after a three-day trip. The first thing he did, to his family’s dismay, was to check his e-mail.

"Is that necessary?" asked Mr O’Kelly. "In his interview, when the manager was asked why he worked as hard as he did, he replied without hesitation, that it was because he loved his family. "And he wanted them to know that (despite the fact that his clients had greater access to him than his family)."

Mr O’Kelly hired a consultant to teach the manager in the story, and those like him, the simple joy of having dinner with their families with their handphones turned off.

Upon returning home, the manager was told, spend the first 30 minutes giving undivided attention to the family.

This advice made me to think hard about my life too.

Even though I’m still in school, I have to confess that I’m guilty of spending 90 per cent of my waking hours stuck to my laptop (even on the train, where I’m writing this article).

Unfortunately, this is true for most of my friends as well. In Singapore, we are taught to be dedicated and hardworking (which is good), but never taught how to prioritise various aspects of our lives.

In his last days, Mr O’Kelly organised the people he wanted to spend time with into what he called “unwinding circles.”

The concept involves six concentric circles featuring the people in his life. The least important people are placed in the outermost circles and the most important ones at the core.

For example, the outermost circle may be filled with acquaintances, the next one with close business associates, and his immediate family at the core.

Mr O’Kelly then spent the most time with the people at the core and less with those on the periphery.

It is a simple yet effective way of realising how important certain people are and how much time (and energy) they deserve.

This has made me think of how often we spend our time with those in the outer few circles, at the expense of those in the innermost ones.

Is it really necessary to have breakfast once a week with people in circle one? Maybe not.

As Mr O’Kelly wrote: "When I joined KPMG, I rose through the ranks by sheer hard work. I set an example by being the most hardworking person ever, at every post I took up."

“What if I had set an example of the most accomplished balancer of life? What if I had left work at 5pm every day and yet got all the work cleared and had become a symbol of a family man?"

It’s certainly worth thinking about.

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