



Seeking Balance in a Stressful Corporate World

By **LIZ PEEK** | August 23, 2007

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HAVE THE MARKET'S ANTICS GOTTEN UNDER YOUR SKIN AND INTO YOUR HEAD? ARE YOU HAVING TROUBLE sleeping, losing your focus, suffering random anxiety attacks, looking forward a little too eagerly to the after-work cocktail? Have you lost your passion for your job?

If these symptoms of stress are all too familiar, you are in good company. According to a study by Yale University, some 29% of American workers report that they are "quite a bit or extremely stressed at work." A survey by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health puts the figure at 40%. (That figure probably jumped last week.) This is a problem that is getting worse, and it is not good news for American companies, or for the economy, believe it or not.

Numerous studies show that stress in the workplace takes a serious toll on productivity and can be a significant factor in ballooning health care costs. The number of employees calling in sick because of stress tripled between 1996 and 2000, according to the American Institute of Stress. The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine reported that health care costs are almost 50% higher for workers reporting a high level of stress.

This is all great news for Tevis Gale, founder and CEO of the Balance Integration Corporation. Ms. Gale, herself the product of the fast-paced corporate world, founded her company five years ago to help companies re-engage their employees and to assist them in reducing the level of stress in the workplace.

Ms. Gale earned her training wheels at General Motors and IBM, among other firms, working in marketing and business development. In 2001, as the dot-com bubble was in full rout, she was working at America Online and witnessed firsthand the anxiety and ennui of her co-workers.

"I always had a lot of passion for what I did," Ms. Gale says. "But I saw people struggling with burnout. I thought, 'If people are going to spend so many hours at work every day, surely we need to make those hours a better experience.'"

She quit even as many around her were being laid off, and she started developing programs to lift the spirits and well-being of those left behind. AOL was her first customer.

In the beginning, she mainly provided companies with yoga and meditation programs designed to bring

people into "better balance." Now she pushes firms to explore what creates job satisfaction and how to maximize their human resources. Though she uses phrases like "learning to master yourself," Ms. Gale maintains that this is no new age nonsense but rather a proven approach to lifting productivity and maintaining a committed work force. One of her strengths is being able to connect with the corporate mindset.

"We use language appropriate for corporations," she says. "We can't walk in and start talking about Swamis."

A senior promotions manager at AOL, Beth Superfin, has been a fan of Ms. Gale's since the beginning. She participates in several yoga classes each week in her office in Rockefeller Center and also enjoys the Monday morning meditation session. "Gale is widely respected in the yoga community," she says. "She handpicks the teachers who are the best of the best. They know how to deal in an office setting. It's a great break and helps me focus for the rest of the day."

Ms. Gale points out that while the upper reaches of management often have coaches or programs available to help achieve some balance in their lives, the junior suits in an organization are usually left to fend for themselves. "We're focused on taking wisdom and giving it to people throughout the organization," she says. "We want to give them skills that are actionable, affordable, and practical. Companies can't afford to send everyone to an executive off-site."

These days, Ms. Gale and her cohorts have about 20 corporate clients who shell out as much as \$400,000 a year for seminars and training sessions aimed at keeping their employees engaged. Though she won't divulge her client list for publication, it contains some very high-profile Wall Street and technology companies.

Among the traditional (to some) yoga and meditation classes, the group also provides seminars with catchy names such as "Piece of Mind at Any Time" and "Just One Thing," which may sound as if they've revived the enigmatic Curly from the movie "City Slickers."

Does the rank and file really go for this? "When we first launch, there's usually a big group flocking to the door," Ms. Gale says. "Then people look to see if management is really supportive. It has to be seen as part of the corporate culture to succeed."

And does it work? "When companies sign up, we agree to look at data they are already tracking," she says. "But honestly, when we start up a program for a company, there is such good will that management usually isn't even interested in measuring the results."

Ms. Gale does not just want to reduce stress, she aspires to create leadership, empower the average worker, and motivate people — something she learned a good deal about when she served in the Army Reserves after graduating from the University of Tennessee. "Here I was, a 'Private Benjamin' bleeding-heart type, and ended up graduating at the top of my class," she says. "I realized then and there I was never going to get anywhere by being apart, by being an alien."

Words to live by.

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