Focus group

Date: 22/11/2011

Interviewer welcomes focus group members and thanks them for participating.

In researching that topic there were three different questions that I looked at. The first one is What is Optimal Work-life Balance, and the questions that I asked everyone, for the women it was ‘what do you think work-life balance is’ and I unpacked that, and for managers it was ‘what do you think optimal work-life balance for working women is?’ – so what is their perception of work-life balance for women.

It was then ‘what is the working women’s reality in attempting to achieve work-life balance, so what are the challenges, what are the difficulties, what makes it hard to achieve work-life balance, and then ‘what are the roles and skills?’

Now the concept of manager-coach is essentially coffee conversations. So manager-coaching is based on the premise that every manager has a role to play as a coach in their relationship and their leadership style with the people that report to them. And when we designed it four years ago we just didn’t call it coaching, because a couple of managers got a little nervous with the concept of coaching. But that is what it is. But the academic term is manager-coach – so that is the term I have used in the research.

So essentially what has come out of it is a couple of key themes that have come out really strongly and what I want to do is give you a brief overview of what those themes are and not go into a whole lot of detail because it is not a presentation, I really want your input and then we can discuss it.

So I think the first thing that came up was the role of the organisation and the manager or manager-coach, their role in the organisation. What came up incredibly strongly from the managers that I interviewed is the fact that it is a male-dominated environment; difficult for women to succeed, difficult for them to climb the ladder, difficult for women to socialise in the evening, to network, and that it is just that their views aren’t always as respected as men’s, and I think there was only one manager who didn’t say that. So out of seven managers 6 of them spoke about the male-dominated environment and the difficulties that they think women experience in getting ahead in the organisation – which I
personally find quite depressing, I went through a huge kind of motivational dip, because it was hard to hear that. So that is something that I would like us to discuss.

The role of the manager-coaching conversations in retention; so the question was ‘Do you think manager-coaching Conversations have a link to Retention’ and I think out of 16 people only 1 said ‘maybe/maybe not – if people are going to leave they are probably going to leave anyway’. Everyone else said ‘you know absolutely, it has a role to play’. And really what that linked to was the role of the manager-coach in really understanding the people that report to them. And ‘understanding’ was mentioned, I didn’t count it, but a number of times. So understanding of my issues, understanding of the person, understanding holistically, understanding the difficulties I face and so on. And in understanding, forming a good relationship, so that when issues arise one is better able to deal with them. So the relationship then forms part of that as well. Okay, so that all forms part of one sort of area.

Also elements that came out with the organisation were Learning and Development – so the importance of the manager-coach in developing the people that report to them, helping them to learn, helping them to grow, helping them to understand their role, understand their role within the organisation, their job, understanding how to cope better and so really learning skills as well. So quite practical.

Then Communication came out really strongly and the word Open was used many times – open door policy, open communication, open to possibilities, open to suggestions, open to ideas. Every possible form of Open you can imagine came out.

And then being reasonable, encouraging thought, being approachable and accessible and so on.

Being present: so if you are having a manager-coaching conversation and you can see that your manager is thinking of the meeting that he has just had or whatever, it is not going to have the same result. So it is really being present and focused and showing an interest in what the person is saying to you. So is a coffee conversation a tick in the box and ‘I have done it and that is the end of it’ or is it ‘as a manager I am really interested in what you have to say’. So showing that engagement.
The issue of performance: managing performance, giving feedback on performance, giving critical feedback, guiding performance, assessing performance and so on is an important area that came out. And then for me an area that was particularly interesting because it kind of struck me when I was working through the literature, is whether the manager-coach is directive or not. So as a manager-coach, and for those of you who are managers you can maybe put that hat on: are you directive in giving solutions in a coffee conversation, and are the people who you are having the conversations with asking for solutions, or are you collaborating to find a solution? And that then starts kind of confusing the role between the coach and a manager, because coaches are technically not directive, but when you are a manager-coach you are still a manager. So you can't take the hat off your head; you have got to find a way to fit the two together. So that is something that I would like us to speak about.

The skills, there is a whole list of skills, and I mean you can chat briefly about that, but I mean your empathy, your listening, I have three pages here, and that was just a quick extraction. So there is empathy, probing, questionning then guiding, being patient, having technical knowledge, having industry knowledge, being able to delegate, to prompt – the list is fairly endless there.

In terms of optimal work-life balance the things that came out strongly, which I was surprised about because I hadn’t anticipated it, was that there is choice. And it came out often – that I need to have options, I need to have a choice in what I do. So how I sculpt my work-life balance is based on the choices that I make. And the options that are available to me. So if I choose to work full time am I making a choice in doing that? And obviously the flip side of that is income. So can you afford to make that choice? So if you can’t afford to then the choice is gone. So then does it result in a whole lot of negativity, or not? So it all goes back then to whether you have a choice or not. And part of that was flexibility. So in having a choice, do I have a choice in how much flexibility is on offer, does the organisation set parameters as to how much choice and flexibility is available and that is something that came out often, where we don’t have a set policy of ‘those are the guidelines for flexibility’. It is technically left up to every manager, and what has come out strongly is people saying ‘give me some guidelines: I need to know that that amount of flexibility is okay but that is not’. So just to hear your input on that – flexible working hours, flexible
working conditions, working from home, the use of technology in enabling that. I have probably got 100 pages on flexibility and the need for flexibility: absolutely paramount when it comes to the work-life balance.

Then fulfilment, being fulfilled in one’s career: one of the questions was ‘what gives women a sense of meaning?’ – and I asked men and women, and consistently ‘achievement’ came out, the need to achieve. And what really struck me is that the focus on family did not come out a lot. So it is there, now is it unspoken, is it just because family is important to women so that they didn’t need to say it, but the managers spoke about family a lot more than the women did – which I don’t really understand. And the importance of wellbeing, and the link was made between wellbeing, satisfaction, happiness and work-life balance. So if you have work-life balance you will be happy, you will have a sense of well-being in your work and you will perform better and therefore the business will perform better. Those sort of links were made.

And then in terms of the realities, oh – just one other thing with the work-life balance was Support: So the manager-coach is an important support mechanism, the organisation providing support, but the other things that came out was support from family, or spouse – so are you expected to do everything at home, in which case there is maybe pressure on you from your spouse rather than support as to what choices you make; paid support – so do people have paid support or don’t they; and then support from one’s team as well – is there back up that if you have got to shoot and fetch the kids that someone can pick it up, or is there going to be an issue with that. So what kind of support exists.

And then in terms of the realities I have mentioned the organisational factors. The other huge thing which came out, which I expected, was Conflict. So dual roles, uncertainty as to where your time fits, looking at it as a sacrifice, you make a decision that you are going to spend more time here than here, then there is a sense of it being a sacrifice rather than a constructive choice.

Time came out hugely, so the difficulty with time, not having enough time, but time was from the women with kids not from the women without kids. So that is definitely a ‘women with kids’ sort of issue. What came out from the women without kids is switching off; so they find it harder to switch off when they go home, whereas women with kids
seem to find it easier. So whether they have learnt to do it or not, or whether they just
don’t have the time to stress about something else, I am not sure – but that emerged as
well.

Then family to home and work to family spill over is something that came out often as
well. So if I am stressing about something at home is it spilling over into my work and is
your work spilling over into your home life? So there was a lot of stuff around emotions
and negative emotions.

The other thing that struck me generally is that we typically look at work-life balance as a
working mom, for me to have optimal work-life balance means that I must be at work in
the mornings, so I spend half my time at work and half my time at home with the kids
doing everything that needs to be done. And what seemed to emerge is that work-life
balance could be a 90/10 split – as long as you are happy. It doesn’t have to be a 50/50
split. So work-life balance does not necessarily equate to doing the grind stuff at home –
grocery shopping, fighting with the kids to do their homework, whatever – those sort of
things don’t seem to bring work-life balance, they just need to be done, and if paid support
could do it well then you might have more balance by being at work, being fulfilled in your
career. So that was quite an interesting thing I hadn’t anticipated because I have always
had a very traditional view of work-life balance.

So in a nutshell that is the summary of about 500 hours of work (laughter) and I don’t think
the conversation needs to be structured in any particular way, other than to just really get
your input.

Okay, any sort of gut response to that sort of information dump?

What are you looking for in terms of responses from us, and in what sort of capacity and
how?

I want manager hats on your heads (3 people), so viewing it as a manager, what your role
is in optimising work-life balance and the skills you would need, but listening to that, does
it make sense? Does it ring true or do you think that everyone I have interviewed are
wrong and it is actually something entirely different. Because what I need to do when I do
my final analysis and writing up of the findings, is be able to say ‘the findings are supported
by the focus group. So it gives you your validity and reliability. Or, the focus group said something different, therefore maybe one can assume that it is a very, very individual thing and you are not going to get a consistency of responses across the group of people – if that makes sense. So it is really a case of saying ‘absolutely, in my experience of managing three women I have come across issues of guilt or lack of time or etc, etc, or I can see that they have difficulty in switching off or not’. So really your response to that sort of feedback, as to whether it rings true or not.

Just on the concept of work-life balance, it almost sounds like just in the discussion that work and life – Work is work and is at the office, and maybe whatever goes home with you; but Life, does that include social interaction and my personal time?

Yes.

As a working woman – it is not just family.

No, it is not work-family balance.

So it includes the other aspects of it.

Absolutely – and that is an important factor.

It is almost like every time when we talk about work-life, it is almost like that whole social interaction component almost disappears; it is almost family and then work.

Exactly. What emerges from the literature is that for women who don’t have kids or whose kids are grown up, elder care is a really important component of work-life balance. Now it hasn’t even factored into my interviews, it hasn’t arisen at all. What has come up once is involvement in more social activities – so having ‘me’ time, having time to go to the gym, or to be involved in community projects or do the things that you are passionate about. I think we often forget, we lose the life side and life equals family - which it doesn’t necessarily!

One of the things I wanted to ask you is whether there is a generational response in terms of some of the questions you have asked: so somebody who may be a little bit older and has worked in a more structured environment has a far different outlook on what work-life balance could be, than for somebody that is coming into the work place for the first time and
is maybe a young mother or something and is demanding much more flexibility and maybe a more mature person hasn’t even thought of demanding that.

Yes.

And wouldn’t you have a very different result in terms of what you are looking for, if you had to base your findings on a younger or older ..?

Absolutely. Yes, the age of people I interviewed was probably women from kind of late 20s to 40s, so a fairly wide spread and I didn’t pick up any significant generational issues, but it can be a factor, and it came up in our leadership conversation last week, with a young group, of the need to work flexibly and remotely. But it didn’t come out hugely. But I think if I had structured it as a lot of younger people then yes, possibly.

There was something you said about the Sense of Achievement, I should have written it down, I can’t remember. Can you just re-cap on that?

The sense of achievement came out with ‘what gives a woman meaning’. So the question to women was ‘What gives you a sense of meaning?’ and the question to managers was ‘What gives women a sense of meaning?’ and most of them said a sense of achievement. So achieving either in work but also in family.

Ja, and I think you said you were a little bit confused about that, but I think my definition of achievement and maybe (employee’s) definition of achievement are completely different; whereas she may want to work flexibly I may think my sense of achievement is here. So I think when people say a sense of achievement I don’t think they meant necessarily distinctly at work or distinctly in their personal life; it just depends on what is important to you and whether you feel you have achieved and that.

Okay.

Yes.

I don’t know whether it came up in the conversations where you discussed flexibility and also around the sense of achievement but what role does the conversation with the manager-coach have in getting that achievement and having that flexibility?
Yes, and what came out is that it is absolutely paramount. So in having effective manager-coaching conversations, where your manager understands what your needs are, you are better able to collaborate and find a solution to meet your unique needs. Ja, that came out strongly.

Okay.

Would that be something that you would endorse?

I think that balance is really a requirement for the success of the successful manager-coaching relationship, ja.

Of having the person having work-life balance.

Yes, on both sides actually.

Okay, so for the manager as well as the woman.

Yes.

To me one of the big things is that there is a constant conflict, and I think often when we talk about work-life balance we try and think of it from a perspective of saying ‘how do I get best of both worlds?’ and to some extent you can never really achieve that; you have got to give up something on the one end to achieve something on the other side. And that is often where I see, and where there has been conflict with staff, is in the whole issue of ‘you can’t have best of both worlds’, you have got to give up something on one side.

Which ties into the perception of needing to make a sacrifice.

Correct.

Of feeling something is going to be sacrificed. What does everyone else think?

I don’t know, I don’t necessarily agree, because I think that yes, you are going to have to sacrifice, if me being at home with my family is what is important to me and that means I have got to give up two hours of work every day, then I am sacrificing work, but I am really winning if you think about it. Do you understand what I am trying to say? If you are
sacrificing one thing and you are achieving on the other end and that is where you want to be, are you really sacrificing?

I think maybe the issue is if you are sacrificing two hours of work, generally there is some sort of monetary implication.

Okay, from that respect.

So if you are sacrificing some part of the salary, then it is a choice, and it is positional as well, because often because you are making that two hour sacrifice, you may not get the positional increase that you would also aspire to getting.

Okay.

And that is where I think there is massive conflict at times.

Which is where those organisational factors are, so as a woman, if I take less, so I take less money, I take less time, I take less responsibility, therefore I take less chance of promotion, less chance of climbing the ladder and I accept that my career is going to stay where it is.

Just a quick comment: therefore it creates first of all internal conflict within the individual, and external conflict with the manager, because the manager needs to make decisions. So I think it kind of has almost this calming down effect because you are now not just conflicted internally there is now external conflict as well

And what does that result in, for a woman?

Frustration

Obviously, it has got to be.

I just want to know, was there any differentiation between divisions in the company? You mentioned organisation, and you mentioned individual managers, I was just curious as to whether there was a difference between different divisions, and also people thought that other people got away with more or less and that of course does cause conflict as well.

There was no divisional difference. I think it is largely related to the leadership style of the manager, more than divisional issues, so there are some managers that have a far more
natural coaching style, far more participative and collaborative, and in those divisions there seems to be a lot more work-life balance, a lot more flexibility, a lot more conversation around it. Other divisions work-life balance is less on the radar, and I actually needed to explain the concept. So it is not on the radar, so I don’t know if that was divisional, but I think it is also positional, and it is at a level: so what seemed to me was that it is easier to achieve work-life balance the more senior you are in the organisation.

Also isn’t it with regard to the value of a staff member: so if somebody is hugely valuable you will do anything to retain that person. So if they want the flexibility and they demanding certain things, you would probably go as a manager out of your way to meet that, because of the value that that person brings.

And also it is that sort of thing that brings conflict: looking at somebody else and seeing that they were allowed more flexibility, things were a lot more lenient, and you look at yourself in your position and that creates conflict.

Ja.

**What do you guys think? Does that create conflict?**

Definitely.

As a manager I think it is difficult when someone is asking for more flexibility but that person is not playing ball; so they use their flexibility as an excuse to not.... It is very difficult as a manager, because now you need to sort of micromanage them, and that becomes very demanding on the manager. It is so much easier to allow someone flexibility when they are a natural achiever and you know they are going to do their work and they are going to meet their deadlines and whatever. It is very easy as a manager to say ‘sure, do whatever you need to, take your dog to the vet, move house, take your kids to school or whatever’ because you have no problem with it.

**So output based – it is easier to manage.**

But it is difficult to give that freedom to someone when you know they should be at work doing work and they are not going to meet their outcomes.

**Yes.**
That is where conflict comes in.

**Yes.**

I agree, I am lucky in that in my role I work from 7 to 12, but if we have either a crisis or a major update I will come in on a weekend, or I will take a computer home and do it.

**So it is a give and take.**

Ja, coming from a previous company where flexibility was everything and work-life balance and working women, when the new leader came in that fell away, and it put pressure on those of us who were not working full day to work full day, and it meant a lot of us left the company. They lost about 75 years’ worth of experience just in my team alone, from the girls that left, because we were all moms and wanted a flexible arrangement.

**So it was a direct correlation with retention.**

Yes.

That is amazing.

I think it is also if you are managing output, like you said, with some people it is easy to say ‘go out there and do what you need to do’ and with other people you know the work is not going to get done, from a manager perspective it is probably easier to just say ‘nobody gets flexibility’ because it is going to come back to you and you are going to say ‘well how come she gets flexibility but I don’t, it is not fair’ – and when the same team are managed by the same person...

...in similar situations..

...exactly. And then to justify that it is because her performance is better than mine, it is just... you know, it is difficult, so some managers will say ‘no’, even though maybe you deserve it and I don’t, I suppose sometimes it is probably just easier than to have to justify yourself.

And give to one and not the other.
Ja. I suppose that comes down to what you are saying about the openness; you look at that within your conversations that you are having with the people that report to you, then you as the manager struggle to give them flexibility because they don’t meet their outcomes: whether that makes a difference or not I don’t know.

It usually doesn’t.

So it is the feedback, the openness, it is ...

So you can now give the person who does perform that flexibility and the person who doesn’t have flexibility needs to understand why.

I suppose it goes back to the coffee conversations themselves, it shows you how relevant they actually are; not handling them the right way and addressing performance issues as and when they come up. You try and address them when a person is asking for flexibility and then it looks like you are solely looking for some sort of reason to say ‘no’. But if you can refer back to the last six conversations it makes it a lot easier.

So, if you are drawn into micromanaging and having to take a very autocratic leadership style with the person, how are you going to manage them remotely or on a flexible basis? Because they need more than that, and your conversations would prove that if you look at the history of those conversations.

It is a trust factor at the end of the day; some managers will say ‘Look I don’t actually care, you are never at the office or you spend one hour a week, if the job is done that is all I am asking for’, where others will want to keep an eye on what you are doing and how you are doing it. So I suppose it is a management style as well as having that trust factor.

That is where the flexibility comes with the caveat of performance and output.

Okay.

I think the key to the success there is consistency, because often, well not often, but you find from time to time, that flexibility almost becomes a weapon, where here is a task to be done and ‘oh sorry, I can’t do that because of my flexibility’, but a week later there is a social event that is going to happen and I can attend that. But it would have taken the same, so where is the consistency now? There should be for the same reason that I couldn’t do the job last
week, I shouldn’t be able to attend the social event because of... And I think that is where a lot of the conflict comes in as well, is because of that consistency, and also from a manager’s point of view, in the one case it is okay to do the job but then in the next case it is ‘no you can’t do it because of your flexibility issues’. So I think it cuts both ways but the consistency is the critical success factor I would imagine.

And that ties into the give and take: so if you know the person is willing to give extra, and they take a bit extra it all evens out, but if it is only take or only give on either part then it is going to result in the conflict.

Maturity, depends on how you do it.

Earlier on you mentioned male-dominated in the company, and you mentioned a lot of it came from the managers themselves. Did a lot of it come from the ladies you interviewed as well? That sort of feeling?

No, surprisingly not. I expected it, it came from one person, where it was more a question of would it not be easier to have a man in the role than have to deal with women and all the other stuff? But none of the other women mentioned it at all. So it was interesting, but it was very much an awareness that was top of mind with the managers; and it was almost an embarrassment, ‘embarrassment’ is the wrong word but it was a ‘it is not good, but we think the reality...’

It is funny, were the managers male?

All of them.

So men see it as an obstacle because it is male-dominated but obviously the females don’t. I mean females are not saying ‘it is male dominated I can’t achieve’, they are not saying anything; and men on the other hand are saying ‘well they see it as an obstacle’. So it is quite interesting that the managers are the ones that...

In fact one woman specifically said ‘I don’t see it as an obstacle’.

Oh is it.

What is the reality?
I don’t know, what is the reality?

I was just wondering, how it ties in though, because if it tied in at all with work-life balance and a sense of achievement, so if there was an issue with achievement at the work place, whether part of that was the fact that it was male dominated, or whether it was just purely related to work-life balance and getting that right, and possibly that impacting on how much you can achieve

Yes, yes.

Does the industry also not have a big role to play? If it is a male dominated industry? So I don’t think it is isolated to the company.

No. And I think it was generally that it was an industry factor, which I wasn’t aware of at all. I mean what does everyone think with that comment? I mean is it because it is a male dominated… in a male dominated environment is it more difficult to achieve work-life balance, or is it that you can achieve work-life balance but in achieving it you maybe achieve less somewhere else and therefore don’t achieve as much career wise, and therefore it is male dominated? Is it a chicken or an egg?

Shoo!

Is there not something to be said for the actual manager in terms of their experience, whether they have the same issues with their wives at home, and possibly understanding the situation a little bit better as opposed to a manager that is either single or has a wife that is a full on career woman.

Good point.

That might have an impact on it.

I think it would. There were one or two people who were able to speak from experience, ‘this is what my wife is grappling with’, and I must say that it was really nice to hear that there was, other than the fact that it was male dominated, which was a reality rather than ‘look we are male dominated so go and take your stuff elsewhere’ – it wasn’t that at all; there was a very good level of understanding of the issues that women face and it is actually really hard and we need to find a way to fix this. And we need to make it work,
and I look forward to the opportunity of making it work. It was given from a very positive slant, not a negative slant. But it was stated that it is a reality and the example that was given was that the guys play golf together. So if me in my role for instance, and I want to say progress, I don’t have the opportunity of networking on the golf course with my managers. So I have a very different relationship with them: it is formal, it is over meetings, at a push it is a coffee conversation but it is not five hours on the golf course.

And that is huge.

Huge.

The bonding or the relationships you build and the networks that you create on the golf course say, or whatever it is; I think it is a huge part of top management – here especially, but I think everywhere, and that is where women I think get the feeling, is because you would rather be at home with your kids, than be on a golf course for two or three hours, and I think then you enter a meeting where you are the outsider – even though you are not the outsider – so you are sitting at a meeting where five people played golf and you were the only one that wasn’t there. And you already feel like an outsider.

I also don’t even think it is not always the woman’s choice: you know if you have a group of ten men, what are the chances they are going to invite one woman to go and play golf? In reality, you are not going to invite yourself and it is really...

**Because would you feel welcome even if you could go? Would you feel comfortable going?**

I don’t mind being surrounded with men...

**Even if you got given the option?**

Ja..

You still might not want to go.

I am saying you might be in a situation where it is not your choice not to go; like when I said you would rather be at home with your kids; other women wouldn’t mind going and playing golf, but you know, how often would it actually happen where a bunch of guys would invite you to go and play golf with them? It doesn’t happen that often.
If guys know that a lady plays golf, generally, I mean for example I think about a broker, actually I am not sure if she is still working there, she is a fantastic golfer, and literally I think she played more golf than any other.

But just go and compare the numbers though!

Ja, for sure.

You can count on one hand the ladies that play.

Exactly.

I do think that there is other options available to both sides. Cycling is growing a lot, running is growing a lot. So from a social interaction point of view I do think that it is getting better.

It definitely is getting better than it used to be, I agree.

So there are I believe better options now than what there were ten years ago, and I definitely think it is moving in the right direction

Very slowly

I think of my place where I was previously, I think somebody made a comment once – if you want to get anywhere you better start playing golf. And it was a reality, I mean the people that actually got ahead did actually play a good round of golf. So we laugh about it but it is a very harsh reality.

Ironically I don’t think it is specifically a female problem; if you look at guys in the company.

Yeah, guys that don’t play golf.

It is exactly the same sort of thing, it is an interaction.

Don’t you think it is easier for them to get into it if they do decide to start playing golf.

They could decide, but I suppose one has to decide whether or not it is an actual problem.

And how it links to work-life balance because the comment that was made is that of the women who play golf they all have older children or don’t have children. So women with
children are probably not going to be on the golf course during the afternoon because they are at home doing homework or whatever.

They would rather have the flexibility to go home and be with the kids.

Exactly.

And if you think about it, I agree with you, I definitely think it is changing slowly, but it is changing. When I started here I think it was a couple of months, and people had made the comment so much that we organised a golf day for the ladies, to go and play, because it is seen as an issue; so I agree it is changing, but specifically here, all the girls went on a golf thing, teach you how to play golf thing. All of us were terrible but nonetheless it was seen as trying to get us involved. That is the one part and the other part is also if a guy can be on a golf course for three hours then why can’t I leave early? So if there is a guy in our division playing golf for three hours then I am going to say ‘well then I am going home’. Do you know what I mean? And that is where a lot of conflict comes from.

But it is work! (laughter)

Golf is an example, but it could be cycling or running or whatever. So to get ahead we need to socialise. So to feel the sense of achievement which is what gives us meaning and to progress in our careers, part of it is socialising and networking and belonging in the right groups and so on. What does that do if you want to achieve and you also want work-life balance?

Say for instance you decide Linda that instead of going home this afternoon to see your girls you are going to go to X function. Is there guilt attached to that or is it a comfortable thing?

I think there is guilt attached to anything that is not taking place in the work environment during working hours – if I can put it that way – and maybe that is because I am older school, you know, your working hours are 8 to 5 and whatever. And the moment you go off and do something that is not work related then there is a guilt factor.

And after hours is there guilt as to being there as opposed to not being at home?

Ja, I think you always have that.
I think it has got to be there, I can’t see it not being there, because at the end of the day you are not doing any one of the two at a 100%. So you are giving up something and the moment you are giving up something there has got to be some guilt attached to it.

Can I throw a spanner in the works? As someone who doesn’t have kids, I probably wouldn’t feel guilty.

At the moment I don’t either.

So you wouldn’t feel guilty either!

I mean if there was an event on a Friday afternoon after working hours, and I went, I wouldn’t feel guilty, what should I feel guilty about? Because I am not leaving kids behind

**Whereas I find it hugely difficult**

I think it is difficult to make that call until you have got them.

**Yes.**

I think you are absolutely right.

And also at your age I couldn’t believe why! I mean now I am late for about 15 minutes and I must start to panic.

I understand it, I think my perceptions would change if I had kids, but right now there is no guilt attached to it.

If your husbands are at home with the kids?

I was going to ask...

I don’t have one of them either! (laughter)

You spend 8 or 9 hours of your day at work, and you spend maybe an hour or two with your kids. You have got to give them the best time that you can. I mean I would rather, if there is a social function, maybe this is a personal thing but I will spend an hour or two but then go home. I would rather not spend three hours because somewhere along the line...
Two questions on that: first of all is there any resentment to the fact that if you have kids generally I suppose, the women will look after the kids? And Secondly, is there any correlation, I mean you mentioned a couple of things, e.g. support from the company, from the team and then at home. Is there any differentiator in the home situation compared to any responses you got? E.g. if you are in a relationship where you get a lot of support, you are able to do that, there is still probably a guilt feeling about leaving your kids but it is a choice you make. But I am pretty sure there are a lot of situations where there is very little support because it is not exactly a 50/50 relationship. And I mean is there any way to gauge that in your responses?

The responses came out strongly that the responsibility for the family rests with the woman. So for the most part women are responsible for the kids and the shopping and for the home etc, and if anything needs to be arranged the woman needs to arrange it, from holidays to planning to etc. There were one or two instances where the husbands were very involved and that was hugely appreciated, but equally so where the husbands weren’t involved. So they might be physically present but not have done anything, and then there was a lot of resentment. What is wrong with him, why can’t he get up and do it, why must they wait until I get home? So that came out strongly, that support from a spouse or lack of support from a spouse feeds into achieving work-life balance or not.

Is that a generational issue? I don’t know, but my thought is that in my generation you would find that guys would help out a lot more, whereas when I look at the older generation, like my mom and dad, my mother does everything; whereas now I look at it and I don’t have that issue because you know...

Our whole group, you have the husbands looking after the baby when the wife needs to do something or go and buy groceries. So I would think it was generational as well.

Personally I have huge support but it doesn’t make any difference to the time that I would spend with my kids. I want to know what they are busy with, even if my husband has done their homework and checked, I still want to know what is going on, because somewhere down the line someone will say something to me and you will say ‘I didn’t know about that’.

And how does it make you feel when as a mom you don’t know?
Ja, I think that is a big thing because if you don’t know what is going on in your kid’s life you are at a disadvantage. So even though your husband might do everything, he might cook the supper and you know, but there is still that need to actually know what is going on.

Anything you would add to that?

I don’t get a lot of support but that is just due to the circumstances, my husband is a contractor, so I do 99%, and I will be quite honest, there is a slight resentment when there is a function in the afternoon and I can’t attend, just from a logistical point of view because I don’t have anybody to fetch and carry children. And I do think I do miss out on a lot of department functions because I can’t attend. So I don’t think I am not getting treated fairly or anything, it is just that I am sad that I don’t have that, it would be very nice on the odd occasion to have somebody say ‘I will pick up your kids and you go’. But then it is a sacrifice that I have chosen, to be able to spend time with the kids.

Yes, so there is choice.

It would be interesting to hear the kids perspective!

Absolutely, did you ask your girls that question?

Ja, and they were kind of ‘ja, it would be so cool if you were at home all the time and you could do this and that for us!’ (laughter)

Don’t care about your life, just do it for us! (laughter)

Do you know, I was exactly the same, but as your kids get older, their perceptions will change, because I had a mom who stayed at home the whole time I was at school, and I didn’t appreciate it then and probably there are answers [to that question] when they are in school and there are answers [to that question] when they are living away from home and they will be completely different. And right now it is all about ‘oh my life will be great, you could do this and that’ but their perceptions will change.

I think as they get older they need you less.

Yes, but also they realise the sacrifices that you have made and the choices you have made to be at home. They improve, they really do!
I have just spent a week away from home and it was a logistical nightmare, it was 8 pages long on what was to be done and what the maid must take out for supper and who was fetching who – it was really a logistical nightmare but the kids, my daughter especially, really battled.

And that goes back to the comment that was made in the interviews of having to do all of those, stressing about supper, is their food bought, etc. Does that constitute work-life balance? I mean is that balance? Does it bring fulfilment, does it bring meaning, does it bring well-being?

It doesn’t, but it has to be done, someone has to do it.

If there was a pill that you could take that you could eat and you didn’t have to have food that would be nice!

That would save a lot of time hey!

I think to me work-life balance, and it is not part of this discussion topic, it is just having the options there, like you mentioned in the beginning you know? I might not necessarily want to work flexible hours or leave early, but just having that option there in the event that something does happen, it is available to you. So if there is a child that is sick or a mom that needs to go to hospital, you can do that, even though you don’t require it every day; it is just having those options there.

And how do you get to that point, what needs to go into the relationships to get to the point of having options?

I think it is the trust and communication that you do have with your manager, and also your fellow colleagues – whether they understand.

Again it is with the performance, you know? If you are someone that can do what is required you know and you have those options and don’t abuse it.

I think it is 100% coming down to the management style, because there is a big difference between telling your manager that you are going out this afternoon to go and pick up the kids, or asking the manager whether you can go and pick up the kids. I think that is the biggest thing, the management style
And what is your sense, what is the style that dominates? Are we expected to say ‘can I go and do it’ or is it more ‘this is what I am doing because I am managing my time and I know what is expected’.

I think out of respect you should ask

Ja.

Okay, what do you think?

I think again, it is around that relationship between the employee and the manager, but I do think it is a courtesy thing, but I honestly don’t think that there is any manager in this business that would if someone had to go to them and say ‘gee I am in a tight spot, I have to go and fetch the kids and am not going to be in for three or four hours’, that would make an issue out of it. And if it is, then there is something seriously wrong

Everyone agree with that?

No.

I think it ties in quite strongly with what you were saying about performance. Even asking and telling, I have no problem with somebody coming and telling me ‘listen I am sorry I am going to have to leave at 2’, but if you have absolutely no issue... (laughter)

She is just demonstrating it!

But if you have absolutely no issue with their performance and are very confident that their work would be done and you don’t have to worry about that at all, it wouldn’t be an issue, but I think it has got to be tied in quite closely with performance and your relationship. It is so easy to manage somebody if they perform well, it is very easy; the issues always come up when there is an issue on performance, because it is very hard to give and take if the manager feels that there is no balance in that relationship.

Absolutely, which goes back to what you were saying - consistency and going the extra mile when it is needed, if you can’t attend you can’t attend, it is not that you can selectively be attending something.
You said it is a courtesy to let your manager know but I mean in a lot of instances the managers are like ‘go and do what you need to do, I don’t need to know all the details’ because he has that level of trust to know whatever you are doing the job is going to get done.

And it is interesting, I hadn’t thought about it before, but (direct report) always asks me and I always go ‘I don’t need to know, it is fine’ but I suppose I do like to be asked – I have never thought about it.

Yeah.

You at least need to know where the person is.

Exactly.

Yes, yes.

I think that is what it is, and having that level of understanding, I know if I ask or tell him or whatever, then at least I have done the right thing by telling him where I am.

And where does that level of understanding come from?

I think it is built through things like coffee conversations and...

It takes time

All those words, trust, communication..

..empathy, ja.

So would you say those words, ‘trust, communication, open to suggestions, good relationships, being present, approachability, accessibility’ – are those all relevant words, would you endorse those?

Definitely.

Yes.

A question on that, you mentioned ‘achievement’, and it is primarily focused around achievement at the office.
Yes.

How closely does it tie up with achievement outside of the office? Because you mention work-life balance and we mentioned for example balance is not just purely work 8 hours and then this and then two hours here, is it tied in with some sort of achievement outside of the office, and if so, how closely is the manager tied into that?

Okay, what came out is that it is tied in to achievement in terms of the success of one’s family. But it wasn’t really tied into other achievement, so it didn’t really crop up - I have achieved because I ran a two hour half marathon or whatever; that didn’t really factor in, but I have achieved because I am a good mother, and my kids are doing well and one of them got an award last week and whatever – that equated to achievement. And it was achievement in both areas, so it was work family achievement rather than work-life achievement. The achievement, I can’t think of a single example where an achievement that didn’t involve work or family was mentioned.

That will also differ wouldn’t it between a single person..

Even the single people I don’t think mentioned achievement non-family related or work related achievement. It is interesting.

So did they not mention achievement at all or did they just mention work achievement?

Just work achievement or achievement with extended family – so relationships with parents, nieces, nephews, family or whatever – that was still family achievement and it was rated as highly.

Interesting.

Because I would think that if you take personal achievement by being your social or personal life or your interest, that will also influence the individual’s outlook on performance per se, and that will obviously spill through and influence your work performance, because it drives a discipline of performance and..

Yes, that positive spill-over. I think people were looking at it as work achievement. Work came out really strongly. I have often had the perception that work-life balance, a lot of people will work because they have chosen to work and get the hours done so they can
leave and go and do the real stuff. And it absolutely wasn’t the case! I want to achieve in my career, I want to succeed, I want to do well, I want to recognised, acknowledged, my career is very important to me, but my family comes first. So when the chips are down I will go home to my family and if there is a crisis my family trumps work any day, but achievement-wise work gives me my sense of identity, it is who I am, and that identity, and maybe it is because I was talking to working mothers; I think if I had had a sample of non-working mothers, family would have given identity.

I honestly cannot believe that if you have an individual that is extremely focused on achievement at the office, that they are going to go home and be this blob, I cannot believe that. You are either a motivated achiever or you are not. You are not going to be one type at the office and another at home.

I agree.

It is interesting, I didn’t hear a single example of ‘I have achieved this level of sport’ or... I am trying to think...

Community involvement?

Yes, maybe around community..

I probably hadn’t thought about it until you brought it up but you said ‘it is work-life balance or work family balance’ and my immediate thought when I hear work-life balance is work and family. So I wonder if it maybe has something to do with that?

That assumption.

My initial thought was work-life balance was work family balance. But it is good that you mentioned it right at the beginning because my perception has changed completely, so I wonder if it maybe had something to do with that.

Possibly, ja. Because I think we are conditioned to think of work family balance, and the question arose ‘what about women without kids’, there is a need to obviously have balance; it doesn’t mean that because you don’t yet have kids that you are not allowed to have balance. And what came out really strongly was work-life balance for men.
I think women that don’t have kids, I think work-life balance is more of an issue because they do work, tend to work, longer hours, don’t actually care whether they get home at 8 or 9 at night and having worked from 8 that morning and it is not an issue. So I think there for me they are dealing with a bigger issue.

I suppose it is because you feel that you can’t justify it so strongly.

When you have kids you say ‘okay I have done this, now I am doing that’

Is that your experience, that you come and go from work, change gear in the car, now you are focused ‘there’

Absolutely.

You don’t switch off. Do you switch off?

Yes, I do.

I might switch back on again later on!

No, I don’t think you switch off.

I have learnt to switch off.

I switch off.

I do, automatically.

So do I, I just don’t have the capacity for it, I can’t.

You may not sit and work till 2 in the morning but I will always check emails, I will always be on top of things before I get in, always.

To me it was a conscious decision to do that, coming from my previous job, I just said ‘not going to happen again’. You will have your days where you will work longer hours but you know weekends, holidays, we will sit Christmas day on the beach and my husband will get calls from clients on Christmas Day and to me, I am sorry, I am not going to do that. And it took a while to get there but I just ...

You have taught yourself to do that.
Ja, well if I don’t do it he doesn’t do it! So now I am forcing him to do it as well!

Is he listening?

He is trying!

As a matter of interest do you guys switch off?

I make a point of switching off. I am very clear about it; I leave the office and that is it, I am done. I don’t get emails on my BB, that’s it.

I think just the environment I am in right now, it is now easy, but it wasn’t so easy before; it does come with the territory. And it is a concerted effort to switch off.

There are times where there are things that are going to worry you, so you maybe switch off for a while and then maybe later in the evening go back and do..

It is in the back of your mind.

There are times.

Ja, when you have a really important thing that is like stressing you, you are obviously not going to switch off completely but...

Did anyone differentiate between this company and any other companies they have worked for? I am just thinking about work-life balance and the fact that our company tends to play a much bigger role in your life than any normal company. Any other company, my experience is, that it is very different, it is work, it is company, you might know a lot of people at work, but you know them at work and it is a pretty clear differentiation between people you know at work and outside, maybe one or two friends. But here it is a very different culture, you have a lot of friends from work and you spend a lot of time with people outside of work. And I just wondered if that came out at all.

My first question was what is the difference or similarities between work-life balance and work-life integration, and it came out there with one person where they said ‘we socialise at work therefore it is integrated because work and life can’t be separated, because my life is work and the people who I work with are part of my life’ and it is integrated in that way. The only other place it came up was in differentiation of organisations was someone said
that where they were previously there were lots of comments. So we had said ‘does it work for some people and not for others’ and they had the difficulty of people saying ‘oh, half day’ when they were leaving at lunchtime or whatever, and a lot of like ‘oh, the housewife is going home’ – so a lot of quite nasty comments. And that happened less here - sometimes the odd joke but not nearly as negative as their previous experience. So those were the two comparisons mainly to other organisations.

But it was more around the integration and how people generally really battle to differentiate between work-life balance and work-life integration. I got sixteen different answers. The only consistency was that people felt that good integration led to balance – which I am still battling to get my head around. I am not quite sure I understand it, because in the literature the terms are used interchangeably often – you have balance or integration or you can have a meshed sort of life.

I think it also depends at what stage of life you are at.

Yes.

Because if I take my working life, certainly the beginning, it was whether I worked 24 hours or 12 hours or 8 hours – it made no difference to me – I worked, and it didn’t make any difference. Now obviously it would, as soon as you have kids it is ‘how can you expect me to work those kind of hours’, you know, so I am sure it depends on where you are in life.

On that work-life integration, I find it astonishing when I look at the (client’s name) for instance, because they mentioned to me that they are all going away together on holiday, to the same place.

Oh no, too much integration?

And I thought to myself how can you do this, because you work together the whole day, then you socialise together because by nature as a family you are going to socialise, and then you go on holiday together. But that is clearly what they are achieving, they are achieving it, but for me looking at it and saying ‘would I want to do that?’ – Never! But...
The question is, is work-life integration about the people that you hang out with, or the work you do? So are they going to go on holiday and talk about a policy or work, or are they going to...

If you go away with people that you work with, you always end up talking about work.

You think so?

It is like talking to lawyers, you always eventually talk about something, how it has gone, or something, everyone now knows.

But you spend 8 hours of your day doing something, it is a big part of your life. The fact that you can talk about it when you are not at work is not necessarily a bad thing.

No not necessarily.

In fact it is probably a good thing, because there is a lot of times you need to vent, you know.

Unwind.

So it is nice to speak to somebody and they have a sense of perspective about what you are talking about.

So it is that understanding of the context. Ja, there were a couple of people that were absolutely emphatic ‘I am not an integrator, I want balance’. So I do my work then it is balanced with home, and the two are completely separate, don’t interfere, I don’t socialise with work people, I don’t talk about work at home, it is completely separate.

And then other people have said ‘no, it is much more integrated.

Some people see integration as balance and others view balance, meaning absolutely no integration whatsoever.

Yes. And integration is a terrifying concept, because it was quite ‘oh, why would I want to integrate?!’ (laughter) Whereas when I work from home I integrate completely, so I study, I answer my emails, I supervise homework, I cook supper, you know, I kind of do whatever. I am doing a bit of everything. And to me that is true integration because everything is happening at the same time. But that is my personal view of it.
I think with this company maybe there is an exception because our families are also so involved in what we do here because there are family connections and social things where they do get together and know the people. So you know when you talk about people at work they know who you are talking about and maybe they are even asking about certain people.

What I also think is nice here is that it is not forced on to you, you bring your family if you want to, if you want to that is also fine so you still have that option to bring them into your work life and let them meet your colleagues and friends at work but you also have the option not to do that. And that to me is ideal. Sometimes you like to integrate but sometimes you also like to keep things separate.

Back to choices.

Just as a matter of interest did you interview any of the black ladies?

I did, two.

Because I think, I am assuming, but I think their work-life balance is a totally different concept to what we have.

Ja, what struck me is, and I think it wasn’t a level thing necessarily because they were at different levels, but it definitely wasn’t as high on their radar, and with one in particular I had to really explain what work-life balance was. But it struck me that there was far more acceptance, far more acceptance and I actually went home and said ‘what is it with white women and this issue of I am not happy, I need more, it is not right... ‘ you know? Because they just accept it, and they stand in the taxi queue for hours and they go home and cook and do all of it – and work a full day. There is an acceptance.

Is it not tied into like a whole Maslow’s hierarchy?

Your basic order needs.

And as soon as you fulfil certain levels you start focussing, it just goes to a point like that.

I think it is, because one of them spoke about transport as a support. If I could get a car my life would be so much easier and I would have better work-life balance because I could get home earlier.
Exactly.

So I think you are quite right.

And I think if you take a person who doesn’t work and I know a couple of people who say ‘we could never do what you do, I don’t know how you do it’ and you just do. And I suppose they are the same, I mean I look at some of them and think ‘I couldn’t do it’, there is no ways I could go and stand in an taxi queue at 4 am in the morning. But I suppose..

It is circumstances.

And it goes back to choice, and my thinking is where the conflict often arises, is when the choice is taken away from you because financially you have to work. So what does that then do to your ability to achieve work-life balance? So when you can afford to have work-life balance it is easier and it is harder, so you can afford to, so you want to, so you strive for it and if you don’t get it, it chafes a bit. If you can’t afford to, do you then just accept that I can’t and this is the status quo and I get up and deal with it. I don’t know, what do you think?

Ja.

I think that is the case.

Because the income thing came up quite often, if you can afford the balance.

It has to be a lot easier for a woman earning a lot more money, you can afford to have a maid, maybe a driver. It might not take the guilt away but certainly takes the stress away.

If you can afford that type of thing then there is a lot of...

Live close to work.

Then you are working because you really want to, not because you have to.

That comment ties in with what you said earlier, around a certain level it is easier to find the work-life balance, for the simple reason that your priorities in life change as you progress up the ladder, and so your priority initially as a young person starting their career, is all about being successful in your career, you almost don’t think about family because you are
probably not married, so all your energy gets channelled into that direction and at some point you now get to lower/middle management level and now the family and the spouse come and adds in and now you are taking everything into a new perspective and say well ‘you know what, I have kind of achieved, I have probably not achieved 100% of what I set out to do, but I have achieved 70 or 80% and that is fine, so now let’s park that a while and channel more energy into the family and try and get more balance in that respect’. Is that not maybe that it is easier, easier financially no. 1, but no. 2 you have kind of reached that self-actualisation level in Maslow’s hierarchy, but in some other areas you haven’t. So it is easier to let that go and concentrate more on the other side.

**So shift it. What does everyone think?**

You have a point.

I think it also ties into allowances made as well. If you are in a higher position in the company it is generally a lot more acceptable if you can make your own time, it is your decision, this is what I am working, no one is dictating to you; whereas at a lower level it is pretty much ‘8 to 4 or 8 to 5 is what you work’. You can try and work around it but that is what you have to do. And I think also generally at a higher level your tasks and things you do change; if you are managing people it is not the same as literally having work tasks for 8 hours straight.

Or being at reception.

You know, it is a lot more flexible if you are managing people, meeting clients and that sort of thing.

**So it comes with seniority but it is also the role that you are in. So you could be a junior sales person and you might have more flexibility than a senior administrator for instance.**

It would be interesting to interview whose husbands could support them, if you wanted to, if they had chosen to work – I wonder what their responses would be.

**I am fairly sure it would be around achievement and the need to achieve and the sense of meaning that comes from career. I would guess…**

There was something I wanted to ask: In terms of the manager-coach in being directive or not, to what extent should a manager-coach be ‘well here is the solution, off you go and do
it, I think this is what you need to do, let me fix your problem for you, bring them all to me and I will be the answerer of all the issues'. Or should it be more collaborative, or is there a balance between the two? Because I got a fairly broad range, so some people said directive, and there wasn’t a question on it, it just came out in the conversation. So some more directive, some more collaborative, participative, ‘let’s work together to find a solution’ and the literature says both. Which is it?

I think it depends on the maturity of the person, also the level of experience that that person has.

Is that the manager or the woman?

Both.

Okay.

I don’t think there is any real answer to this question, I really don’t.

I don’t think there is, it depends on the individual.

First of all as a manager, some people have a different manager style, it doesn’t necessarily make it right or wrong. Some people actually manage incorrectly, that is how they manage, and it then sits with the manager. At the same time it can sit with the person being managed – going back to their performance, and a new person for example you would have to manage differently from someone who had been there a long time. So what they are supposed to be doing: if you are a salesman, you wouldn’t manage them the same as an administrator for example or an underwriter or something like that. So I just think there are so many different scenarios, there is no real answer.

I think if you are a portfolio manager, if you have the same function even, regardless, you might have the same responsibilities but you are not going to manage the people the same, we are all different.

It is all about individuality.

So if it is an individual process are we then saying that the manager-coach style is that they take a fairly individual style, with each individual, based on those individual’s needs and
the challenges that that individual faces. Are we then saying that they then need to get to a unique and individual solution per person? Or is it possible to have ‘that is the company policy and it applies to everyone, like it or lump it, end of story’.

One size fits all won’t work

There are real challenges in it, if you say it is not, because again it is the consistency factor.

So if it is not one size fits all there are challenges.

Serious challenges in not one size fits all model.

One size fits all, is it in terms of management style or...

... in terms of policy from HR perspective side and saying these are the rules for flexibility.

Because if flexibility equals work-life balance you then say ‘well that is the way you have to do this, you have to do that, that will give you flexibility and therefore you will have work-life balance’. Is it as simple as that?

Or both: you have to be in the office from 10 till 3, that is it, you have to be, and flexible outside of that or...

Maybe set guidelines but still be flexible within that.

It is a lot more difficult to have an individualised solution to each person’s issues or problems; it is a lot more time consuming I think.

I think the other factor is the size of the company: as we get bigger it makes it much much harder to be flexible, because there are a lot more people at the same sort of level and as soon as you start taking that sort of approach there is a lot of room for misinterpretation and all sorts of stuff

Because what it ties into as well is taking an individual approach to learning. So every manager, part of their role, which has come out, is driving learning and development for those individuals. So it is understanding what the development needs are and driving that individually, and that could indirectly, I suppose, lead to optimal work-life balance because it means that the person may progress in their role, they may become more outcomes
driven, they may in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy climb the hierarchy and that is a whole lot of assumptions – I don’t know that they do lead to that, but it was interesting that learning and development came up quite strongly as the role of a manager-coach and that is absolutely part of the role of the coach as an external or internal coach, learning is part of it. I am not sure where it fits to work-life balance, I don’t know.

The flip side of this is always something that bothered me; a lot of it is around development of the person reporting to the manager. There is no real straight answer but in terms of developing the actual manager..

Absolutely.

I think it is just so crucial because so many managers, you can have as many of these things as you like, every single manager in the company, and just in terms of focussing on what managers need to be doing, but it is very individualised, you know you can have group strategy sessions and group management workshops and it is fantastic because in theory it gives you a lot more options; you are aware of a lot more ways to manage people. But as much as we have appraisals for people that report into us, it is just so much, there just has to be a way to have the same sort of thing but just reversed. I don’t know how you do it because there are just so many issues around that.

Individualised solution per manager.

Ja, I think there is a lot of people that would benefit from that – whether or not they would take the advice, I mean as I say it is a very slippery slope, but I mean personally I would love it.

And that is ultimately the purpose of the processes that are currently in place, the pdp’s, so filling the gaps with the managers so that they are able to then effectively develop the people who report to them. And I suppose, thinking about what you are saying, what came out of the interviews is that the more effective our teams are, as managers the more it frees us to have work-life balance. So if I have to breathe down (direct report’s) neck 24 hours a day, I can’t be watching cricket, so my work-life balance is dependent on her performance. So it is developing my skills to develop her so that she can do what she needs to do so I can have balance.
That is exactly it, I mean as a manager surely a huge part of your role is actually managing, but how are you appraised on that for example? If your department is making profit are you good? There is huge staff turnover, are you good or are you not? It is always just something that... and I think it ties into this.

Yes, it does, and it is certainly top of mind because we are looking at different ways to have individual solutions – easier said than done.

I also think we need to empower people to manage themselves, because there is so much emphasis placed on poor managing, your responsibility it to make me a better person – and I think we need to look at empowering people to manage themselves and if you want to get somewhere you need to know how to get there and what you need to do.

Very good point.

I just think there is too much emphasis on the manager, and it is up to you. It is not up to a manager to make you a successful person.

When you did a one-on-one you interviewed me, not as a manager, but as someone reporting to a manager, and then you said today I must have my manager’s hat on. So when I was listening to your feedback I was trying to think about ‘okay, now from a manager’s point of view, now in my interview I said to you my manager must be understanding, trust me, I need flexibility, I need this’ and listening to your list now I was like ‘gee, being a manager is difficult!’ (laughter) Actually it is so much easier to be the ....

Ja, it is a huge responsibility, and the individual..

Where do they take responsibility?

That is about people, because to me, you are responsible for your own development.

There is too much pressure on the manager.

You want that work-life balance and what is going to be important for you, you will have to drive that, it is your responsibility because it will be unique to you.

Training of managers should more be an empowerment for them to be able to empower those people to understand.
Which came out in the role – for them to empower, but not to necessarily empower them, so I must just double check whether it is covered in the development areas for manager-coaches.

And I suppose the only person who can actually individualise your solution is you.

Ja.

Because you don’t know what my situation is, as much as I tell you, you are never going to know 100%, so the only person that can actually figure out what is needed, is you.

I think it is quite terrible that people expect managers to come up with a solution to their life, and where they are going and how they are going to get there. How long is it going to take them to get promoted, and what courses I should be studying – that to me is really sad. If that is their perception of what the manager should be doing then maybe those are not the people we should be employing.

I mean you can ask for guidance, from someone who has more expertise than you. But essentially that is something that should be driven by you.

Ja, you should rely on the experience to give you some guidance.

Ja.

So choosing the manager as a sounding board.

Because when you said the model of the manager-coach being purely directive or collaborative, if it is purely directive you are not doing the staff member any favours because they would never learn then, and also if it is purely collaborative then at some point the staff member is going to sit back and say ‘you are not giving me any solutions here, you are throwing everything back at me’.

That I think is the primary difficulty being a manager-coach, is that you still are a manager and you are responsible for the job, and the financials and the outputs and whatever, but at the same time you want to empower, to grow, to develop and to enable the people who report to you to perform better. You shouldn’t be doing it for them, because it is them that
is doing it, and it is finding a way to bring those roles together, which is a difficult role, because it is knowing when to be a manager and when to be more coaching in one’s style.

When we spoke about individualised solutions we said a blanket approach doesn’t work. The concept of parameters came up quite often, of managers saying ‘it would be really nice to have parameters’ and when I mentioned it outside of that, to one of the senior guys, they were ‘no!’, but it came out often.

Is the answer in that not something similar to our model of Strategy, where you put the parameters down of where you just won’t go. So outside those parameters you will never go, but yet the parameters are still fairly wide. So it gives you a lot of options in between but you will never cross those boundaries. Maybe that is something to keep in mind.

It is more of what you won’t consider.

Is that not too wide?

You have to have flexibility, if you don’t have flexibility I just can’t see it working.

I also think it really does depend on your level, as a senior manager said ‘why would you put parameters up?’

Yes.

They don’t need parameters.

They can do what they like, they know what their objective is, they are very clear, they report and they say what is happening, you know? If they are out in the afternoon then they are out in the afternoon, it is not an issue. But for management on a lower level you have to manage people that do require some sort of parameters, and it is quite clear, because they are asking for it; not rigid there and there, but some sort of guideline.

And I think that is exactly it, managers are asking for guidelines as to how much can be agreed to and how much can’t. So if I report to (manager) and she gives me complete flexibility, but (employee) reports to (another manager) who gives her no flexibility, it goes back to that consistency thing. So it is ‘what are the guidelines for achieving an individualised solution’?
It is also difficult to not do it at levels, I know where you are going; it is very difficult not to do that.

Yes. Because then it puts us into a band organisation which is what we are trying to avoid.

It depends on the department: in terms of the function that you do, sometimes you deal with clients and it is a lot harder to make it very flexible because there are certain working hours. But in another division it is a lot easier, so it doesn’t necessarily have to be company-wide but it might just be a very good idea, even if it is every division within the company.

So every division has their parameters that they work within.

Is it not around your KPA’s? Is it not around setting KPA’s and saying ‘those are the outcomes, that is what needs to happen, whether that happens in four hours a week or forty hours a week you don’t care, but then also clearly understand that there will be limits in terms of your progression within the business’. So if these are your KPA’s, understand that you are never going to be a senior manager, but this could potentially get you to middle management level.

That exactly goes back to the comments which came through of in achieving work-life balance and maybe higher flexibility you either make a salary sacrifice or a positional sacrifice but to have it all is practically impossible.

Ja.

Does that make sense?

It is a reality; you can’t have it all. I mean there are certain times where you say ‘well I have got to give a little bit here because I am just not going to succeed in other way’. I think that is reality.

Just out of curiosity, and it is kind of outside of what you doing here, but have these sorts of issues come up in reverse – not the females, but the guys experiencing this sort of thing? So for example you mentioned the generational thing, young guys tend to be more involved and get that balance right. Is this happening in reverse at all?
I haven’t come across it here in the reverse, but it did come up in a few interviews where managers in particular, and some of the women, said ‘it is no different for men, they have every right to the same level of flexibility, they should also have work-life balance, they should also be able to effectively meet the needs of work and family and if you like they are achieving it both without feeling guilty, without feeling they are making a sacrifice and so on. So it came out in that respect and one of the managers said ‘my worry is that if we put something like this in place for women, what if the men now say ‘now what about us?’” So there is that cognisance that it needs to be broader and in the UK for instance, regardless of male or female, you are entitled if you have a child at home under 18, you are entitled to flexible working conditions, and you then negotiate individually with your manager as to what that is.

More and more you are finding people in the work space where it is a 50/50 thing – both parents work and have responsibility of fetching and carrying or whatever. So I think it should be whatever you give to the women, the men must get the same.

What did come out based on that is the comment that men are more likely to be able to play more active role and kind of back their wife up, if they are in a more senior position. So it is easier for a senior man to kind of go and do the doctor’s appointment than it is for a woman or junior guy. So it is almost more acceptable for a woman to push for work-life balance, that was the impression I got and it wasn’t really unpacked in that way, but for a man to have work-life balance you will probably find he is in a senior role.

I think it ties back to the comment about work-life or work-family balance, because the perception is that the woman takes care of the family and if it is work family balance then the perception is that women should get the time off and men should be working. So I think that is where it ties back in.

Yes, quite traditional

Yes, and it is quite traditional, I think it is changing slowly but surely, but for now I think that is how it is.
And in fact when it did come out I asked the question ‘is it still like that? Is it still traditional, that the man earns the money and the woman runs the house?’ and a lot of people found that it was. They said ‘we think it is changing but we think it still is like that’.

I think it has changed quite a lot

I think so too

I think over the last couple of years it has changed quite drastically.

It is also due to necessity as well; it is very tough now for only one person to work.

Only one salary, ja.

It is purely in terms of money.

And there are situations where the woman is earning more than the husband.

A lot

And then there is a social function and she says ‘well I am sorry, I have got to go, it is my bonus and your bonus and no offence but my bonus can send our kids to school!’

Exactly

That is a reality

Things are changing hey

Yes.

I think there is a lot more of that than we realise.

So it is more dual responsibility and that can be not just dual responsibility as a working mother I run the home, but dual responsibility between a family, that you take dual responsibility for bringing up the kids and dual responsibility for bringing in the money.

One thing I wanted to bring up and I think it is not pointing fingers, but I think flexibility in terms of senior manager and in this case more senior managers at this company are men, and it is something that is taken for granted, and it is not something that they completely understand, because you know I would go back to a comment that was made to me, ‘well
why don’t you go to gym at lunch time, why don’t you go to gym in the afternoon, or after work’ and well..

And do you feel entitled to?

No not necessarily, but it is just that lack of understanding, I can’t actually do it. It is quite foreign to some people because they have taken that flexibility for granted for so long and they don’t realise why I can’t

Are you talking about it being foreign because they don’t understand that you have a family to go to or that they just don’t understand..

No, I think that they understand that but they don’t understand that you actually, you know, well if you want to get that done well then you better get up at four o’clock in the morning type of thing and go and do it, because that is the only way you are going to fit it in’. ‘Why would you do that? Why would you get up at four in the morning?’

I have the same, I get up at three or four and I study and I have often had the comment from a senior manager ‘you do what?’ Well I can’t fit it in otherwise!

Total lack of understanding.

It is much easier for women to have managers who are men who play more of a role in their families.

Definitely.

For them to say to their male boss, I need to go fetch the kids from school, if that male boss is the kind of boss who also has to go and fetch them.

Absolutely.

Just an example, my sister in law is also pregnant and the one boss she told was very happy about it and very supportive and said ‘don’t worry, come back whenever you feel better’ and the other boss laughed at her and said ‘do you really think you are going to do the same job when you come back?’ Are you going to fit everything in after you have had your first baby? And she said she worked in London for eight years and they never treated pregnant women like that, and this guy just stood there and laughed at her and said ‘well I have got a child and
I don’t think you are going to manage when you come back’, and the other boss who has three children said ‘no man I don’t want people treating my wife like that, so everything is in place when you come back and don’t worry about your job and all your benefits’. And she said it was like shocking to see.

There were one or two comments around maternity leave and the fact that even though we have fairly good maternity leave policies, the feeling from managers is that we should be far more flexible; there should be far more ways of accommodating people to integrate back slowly, etc.

If you look at SA generally, just compared to some of the European countries..

Ja, it is hard to come back after three or four months

Did leave come up at all? The amount of leave we have?

No.

That is a subject for debate.

Ja, it actually came up in our leadership conversation.

I didn’t actually think of it but obviously a company that gives more leave makes it easier, because a woman feels a lot less guilty saying to her boss ‘I am taking leave’. I had an employee who took Friday off because she wanted to go and spend the day with her son. I mean it is easy for you to say that, because you don’t have to justify it. And a company that gives a lot less leave is going to be making it more difficult.

But if you are using your leave to go and do dentists and that sort of thing then you don’t ever have a holiday. And I don’t think that is the case here but..

Ja, I think there are lots of organisations nowadays.

I mean when we started working if you wanted to go you put in half a day’s leave. You know.

Is your thesis is mainly around our company or general?

Well I have used our company because I have done all my interviews here.
I am just thinking we have been concentrating a lot today on the kind of gender differences, but we haven’t concentrated on any cultural differences. How does the traditional Muslim male manager view work-life balance because they have no concept of work-life balance from a cultural perspective.

Yes. In terms of people I have interviewed, I have interviewed broadly so I have made sure that I have covered all genders and all race groups and there weren’t specific differences; but there were only two comments, and I can’t even tell you what they were because I actually didn’t pay much attention to them, two comments that took race into account, of cross-race and they were positive comments, cross-racial conversations. So what I do is when I do my limitations I will exclude cultural and racial factors, because otherwise it just becomes huge. But that is a whole different research project, you could just go on and on.

On that, maybe more importantly, not cultural differences in terms of religion or anything like that, but actual business culture. A lot come in from other businesses and there are very different cultures out there, so if you have worked at a place for 20 years or even five years, and you move to a company like this, that culture is engrained in you and it is very hard to adjust, especially if you are in a position where people report into you; it is probably easier reporting into people, because then you can acclimatise, but it is very difficult if you come in with a different business culture to suddenly adopt a new culture. Because you are not likely to start asking about that sort of thing, so I think it is very difficult.

And I think that is where, from a people development perspective it is that continual sort of education process, of ‘this is what is high on the agenda for us because of our culture’, and where managers aren’t complying and doing it, then the conversations will need to be had because if, say for instance, they say in finance it doesn’t apply and we don’t believe in work-life balance, etc because historically I come from a different environment, it is quite limiting. So then it does need to be resolved.

Anything else? Anything that as we have spoken you have kind of had this epiphany that is going to make my life really easy! Does the feedback that I gave you at the start resonate in any way? If you were interviewed would you have said similar things? I know (respondent 15) is in a unique position because she did, but she is now wearing a different
hat. I think there have been valuable areas where it kind of questions some of it and that, obviously, I need to build in.

I think I would probably have made similar comment.

The switching off came out strongly, the understanding, the role of the manager in really understanding the person holistically, looking at a unique solution, not being directive. I think for me the big thing that came up was that there is so much pressure put on the manager to do this, it is not all about the manager.

I think that was interesting, it was a good way of having you here and at an interview, is that you see the flipside. Because I would probably have answered the same as any employee, but looking at it from the perspective of a manager I would answer very differently I think.

In my interview as I said, I want all of those things, I want my manager to allow the flexibility to trust me, I want this, this and this. Then listening to it from the other side I was like ‘this is where you draw the line’ (laughter). I mean how on earth am I going to get to know all my reportees as individuals and understand each person’s career development needs and give them flexibility and still get my work out on time! (laughter)

It is a tall order!

I still think now, I am completely convinced that there is an issue, there is too much pressure on managers. People need to take more responsibility.

Okay. So if people abdicate to the manager, that is a fault. It needs to be a two way street, because what did come out is people going to their manager in a coffee conversation and saying ‘I would like to do this, this would work for me, this is where I am at, this is what my development needs are, therefore I need to work from home once a week or I need to go through X development and I want to be mentored by this person’.

And this is how I am still going to meet my outcomes.

Yes.

Motivate and give us solutions or something.

Ja, I would still believe I am going to meet my outcomes because I am going to do X, Y and Z.
Does that mean though that the manager mustn’t fully understand where the people are at? Because that came out so strongly.

I mean to the best of your ability, yes, but as a manager you are never going to understand 100% where I am; only I will know that. So to the best of your ability, yes, but you are never going to completely understand.

And you are not there as their therapist.

Or a parent, because some of the things you listen to, you are basically taking on a parent role for a lot of the people that report to you.

Okay.

I think your manager is there as someone who is more experienced than you, that can guide you, but not pick for you.

Definitely.

So you can’t have a manager say ‘this is your career path’. How do you know that is where I want to go, because you don’t know me completely. So I agree with you 100%. And I think it is a traditional view as well. I think that traditionally it is viewed that your manager will be responsible for your development.

And that is where the manager-coach role is so important because a coach enables and facilitates but doesn’t do. And I have had people say I would love to have a coach, someone who can tell me what to do. That is not a coach, a coach wont tell you what to do. A coach will ask you what you want to do and how you are going to do it. So it is a very different thing, and that is part of the manager’s role, ‘that is great, what do you want to do, what would work for you? How can you do that and fulfil your outputs?’

It is difficult to be the manager and the coach.

Yes. It is.

It is easier to be a manager or a coach but to be both is very hard. I mean I am not saying we shouldn’t strive towards it as managers and try and understand all the people individually; you have got to try and achieve that, but it is impossible to be everything on that list.
Ja. Okay, so it is being cognisant of how hard it actually is.

As a coach you have to be completely objective, and it is impossible to be completely objective if you are a manager because there is a subjectivity to it, you still have a business to run.

Absolutely, and ultimately you are responsible for the performance that that person has to deliver on.

I think it is a very important point, I mean you can look at somebody on that sort of level and ultimately it has got to come down to performance, and then the lines start blurring very quickly I think.

Whereas a coach doesn’t need to worry about performance, it is all about personality.

Although life coaching absolutely – but in terms of business coaching it is strongly around the performance in the division and of the business. So it is the focus on through conversation enabling performance of the individual so that they perform for the division and therefore make your life easier, rather than harder.

Yes. Technically, that is the theory.

Anything else? No. Thank you.

I am going to play golf now! (laughter)

Well in that case I am taking the rest of the day off!

I am going to go home to my kids! (laughter)

The interviewer thanks the respondents and ends the focus group session.