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The manager-coach's roles and skills as needed to optimise the work-life balance of working women.

Gouveia, Lynda Jane

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Interview 9

Date: 13/9/2011

Respondent: working woman

Level: junior management

The interviewer welcomes the respondent and explains the process

The meaning of work-life balance

Question 1

Explain what you think the similarities and differences are between work-life balance and work-life integration, do you think they are the same or different?

For me, I think it would be the same because you have to balance your work and your personal life at the same time, so I think they would be the same.

Question 2

What does work-life balance mean to you?

Exactly what it says - I think finding the balance where you feel comfortable that you are giving enough time to your work and you are on top of things and being challenged; and life in general, having time for your kids, social activities and just balancing and feeling fulfillment on both sides.

Question 3

In what way is work-life balance important to you and why?

It is important because if you don't have the balance right, then the wheels start falling off. If you are putting too much into your work or you're not putting enough into your life at home and children and visa versa - so to get that balance right means you are not feeling stress on either side and you are just feeling on top of both.

If you don't feel on top of both, what does that result in?

Stress!

Question 4

Describe your current levels of work-life balance?

I think currently, in the last sort of month or so, it is the first time that I have kind of got the work-life balance right. I have discussed with my manager that I maybe work from home maybe 2 days a month just to start off with, just to get on top of the administrative things, that is what stresses me as there are a lot of little things, so if I have a checklist that I can just tick off things that I have done, then I feel on top of it. So I did that last week, its still very recent but last week I worked from home and it made a huge difference. So, I worked flat out in the morning and then went to fetch my daughter and then went to the nursery and went to go and buy seedlings for the Spring Day at school, and we went and had lunch and it was relaxed. I got to spend some time with her and then she had a sleep and I carried on working, so it was a good balance, a start and I think it will work. But the work is a different thing for me at the moment, because work for me at the moment is a bit of a churning out things and I don't feel - I am enjoying it - but I don't feel that I am adding value to the point that we are offering services where we are challenging divisions with what they should be doing on the market. It's just a matter of being reactive instead of proactive, so it's a start and I think we are going to look at things in a different perspective going forward.

So you have this new arrangement, how was it before this?

This is very recent, what I have learnt at this company - and it has taken me a long time to get there - but if you don't ask for things which you are very entitled to do, you won't get any further. So previously, it was quite sort of - this is an 8 to 5 job and with (previous manager) it was quite different but I think my work-life was more focused on work and I arranged everything around work and work came first. Then given my personal circumstances, I have had a re-look at things and just realized that work is not everything and I need to focus on one thing. When I am happier with her (daughter) and I am happier at work and I get the balance right, then ultimately everyone is going to win at the end of the day and she will get more out of me because I am not so stressed. I feel I have learnt to delegate more and I don't feel I have to do every little thing, so asking people like (colleague) to do little administrative things that take up my time and I can then focus more on the bigger picture and have time to think about ideas for divisions and what they should be doing going forward.

So less of the reactiveness you spoke about and more of the proactive?

<u>Question 5 and 6</u>

Okay, it kind of touches on your answer for that one but maybe just to unpack it a little bit more - what are the challenges, or do you experience any challenges, in achieving work-life balance and if so what are those challenges?

I think the biggest challenge is time during the day and trying to fit everything into one day. Time is definitely the biggest thing, ideally I would like to spend more time with my daughter in the afternoons and do it on a more regular basis, but it does mean sitting at night working or trying to catch the work up. But with the type of job that I have, it is not always realistic. You can't go out there with a set plan and say 'this is what I am going to do' because that is a challenge in itself. So it is something that I am aware of and I just need to keep top of mind and obviously it is going to become increasingly challenging as my daughter gets older, obviously with extra murals you want to be more involved, with working you want to be more involved, but you have to find the time, so time management is probably the biggest

thing. So if you can learn to manage your time and plan as much as possible, it will be less stressful and you will be able to achieve that balance more effectively.

Okay any other challenges, so time is a big one, any others?

I think work-wise, the challenge is not always having my manager around, so a lot of the time I end up making decisions because he is not here, which is a challenge but it teaches you to get on with it, be more robust because he is not here and get things done. So that is a challenge. From a work point of view, the company, I think, is very open to hearing suggestions and from that point of view it motivates you, because you know the suggestion is not going to be just thrown out of the window - whether it is a good or bad idea, they will listen. I think that's it.

Question 7

To what extent do you think work-life balance is achievable for you, you have had the experience of a day at home, looking long term - to what degree do you think it is achievable?

It is quite difficult to say because I need to have this conversation with (executive manager) which I will be doing soon, and just trying to understand where he sees us fitting in and what our responsibilities will be going forward. Because if you are not going to be here to do the everyday running around to get your job done and if your whole role is going to change, then that will determine a lot on achieving work-life balance. At the moment I don't have to be here, but at the same time marketing is not a job that you do from home so I understand that, then I am also the kind of person that needs interaction with people, so I would ideally like to be able to say, this and this is what I need, this is what the job entails and would I be able to get that balance right and have the time with my child and get my job done? And I think the point of view on that from most management here is that nobody is micromanaged and as long as you get your job done at the end of the day, whether you are here 8 hours a day or 2 hours a day, is irrelevant.

I think having a voice is very important, if you feel it is not working, I think it is important that you speak up and they hear that things aren't working. I find the younger generation definitely work more to this model, it doesn't matter where you are as long as you are getting the job done and I see that a lot with the younger people. Whereas the older people, sort of from 35 up, it is almost like you need to be seen at your desk, it's an old school thing, it is really not expected, I suppose it is just the way you are bought up, so that would be a challenge as well, sort of changing your mind set, coming back to your previous question.

Question 8

Although you say you can't really say how achievable work-life balance is, if you achieved optimal work-life balance for yourself, what would it look like and what would it feel like?

I think it would feel very content, happy and just feel challenged - that I am being challenged in my job, that I am giving my child everything that she needs, a healthy upbringing and I think if my daughter is happy, then it is an indication to me that it is working. Then I suppose also positive feedback from my manager that you are doing your job, and doing it right, and taking initiative, and being proactive and not reactive - as long as you are at a point in your job where you really understand what the company is about.

Anything else on how it will look and feel?

Financially I would be secure, hopefully. It's also quite difficult - it is also the ultimate of what you would like it to be, but given my circumstances it's difficult to say.

The working woman's reality in attempting to achieve work-life balance

Question 9

Looking at the questions around a working woman's reality and how that feeds into work-life balance, what are your realities as a working woman?

The reality is that you have to work to earn money to pay the bills. The reality is you have a child and you are ultimately a single mother now, so I have no choice, I have to make this work, and luckily I am in a case where I enjoy my job. That is not a challenge in itself but the reality is I am the responsible person at the end of the day, there is no one else out there to do this, so I have to look at it like that. You kind of have to make sure for the rest of your life that you have got a job and are able to support this child, to me that is the biggest reality. A job should be something you want to come to everyday, I don't want it to ever be 'ah no, I have got to go to work today', I don't want it to ever get like that, it scares me, because I don't know how many other places there are out there like this.

The reality of the job as well - we now have a full marketing division which there never was before and now we have the job to get the company out there and the reality is we have to make sure we are doing a great job or we won't have a division.

Okay anything else, any other realities?

Not that I can think of.

Question 10

How do these realities impact on your ability to achieve work-life balance?

It is a difficult one!

What makes it difficult?

I don't know - the reality of it is you have to have a job in order to survive these days; but if you achieve work-life balance then the reality doesn't have to be harsh - the reality can be a positive thing. The job kind of gives you self-worth, so work-life balance to me - I couldn't be a stay at home mom for instance because it wouldn't be challenging enough for me to sit at home all morning and then spend time with my daughter in the afternoon. So I have to work, but I enjoy my work so it's not a negative reality.

So what you are saying is - the reality is you have to have a job to survive these days but if you achieve work-life balance, the realities don't have to be harsh - the reality is you couldn't be a stay at home mom because you wouldn't be challenged enough, so although you need to work, you want to work, so it is not a negative reality.

So I suppose the question then is, does work-life balance make those realities positive realities or can those realities be positive without work-life balance?

I think that is also what I am trying to say, I think it can be positive. The ultimate is your work-life balance is exactly what you want, I mean that is your ultimate picture that you want to achieve, and from a work perspective as well - your reality can't be so far up in the clouds that you can't achieve it, they have to be realistic or you won't achieve your ultimate work-life balance. You can't have the expectations of having a cushy job sitting at the top management earning a great salary if you aren't putting in the hours – it is not a realistic ways of seeing things. So I don't think you should set your goals so high that you will never be able to achieve them and be disappointed by it. I think a big factor here is being content and happy with your life and work.

<u>Question 11</u>

What gives you a sense of meaning?

I think, at the end of the day, if I feel like I have contributed then I love it, to smile when I am able to tick off things that I have achieved, when I know I have contributed to a bigger picture, that feeling of belonging and being part of a team and also being a good mom, that

your child will spontaneously say to you 'I love you', without you pre-empting it - then it's just the feeling of being loved and wanted. Also, if you have an idea and people respond positively to it, you are contributing positively to the bigger picture.

Okay anything else?

Also being there and being supportive of other people and making their lives easier. If I am able to help somebody in the workplace achieve what they are trying to get through, then that gives me a sense of meaning.

Question 12

Based on that, what brings you fulfillment?

Isn't it the same – no?

It might be.

You do feel fulfilled when you have accomplished something, when you have done a lot of work on something and it's successful and you can tick the box. I think from a personal point of view and my daughter, when she does things on her own like saying thank you - that tells you that you have done a good job as a mother. I think if you could ultimately achieve that ultimate work-life balance, that would be first prize and you have achieved what you are working for.

Question 13

Alright, so what support could be provided to you to optimise your levels of work-life balance?

Support from a management point of view, that they do support working from wherever to get your job done, so that can be working at home or working at a coffee shop or just time out. That your manager embraces it and is happy for you to do that, it is not that you are micro-managed, as long as you are getting your work done. So support from your management and peers as well, so it's not why are you going home early or why are you not here? Support from your team is also vital.

Question 14

What do you think should be the organisation's role if any, in optimising work-life balance?

I think it should be clearly communicated that they do support work-life balance, especially for woman, the challenges with children and fetching and karting around. If they say 'yes, this is fine you can do it', you will feel comfortable and not feel scared to ask, that you know it is okay to be doing it. Then if the organisation understands that a woman's role is very different to a man's role, but you know they are comfortable with you planning around trying to find that optimal work-life balance. If you know that right from the beginning when you start your job, it is easier to start off like that than to start another way and then trying to change your mindset later.

What was it about that mindset that needed to be changed?

It's an old school thing that you feel stressed if you are not here at 8 o' clock, even if you know no one is checking on you. It's getting your mindset around it - it is very difficult because it is ingrained into you – it's very difficult to get around that - and also just to know that you aren't being micromanaged, you can get here and as long as your job is done, it's ok. So unless you force yourself to do it then you can't get your mind around it.

Just to pick up on what you said just now and I want you to tell me a little bit more - you said the woman's role is very different. What is it about a woman's role that is different to a man's role?

I think by default - a woman ends up enrolling the child as school and making sure the child goes to school everyday, you need to plan everything about your child's life - the day-to-day running of their life, so what they will eat, what they are doing in the afternoons and weekends, so a woman has to give a lot more time to your child, whereas a man's role is, and this might be very old school, but it is almost like they have this mindset that they pay the financial side of it and bring in the bread and butter, which has also changed as well. But ultimately, it falls on the mother to plan basically everything from the child to the holidays, to fetching, to anything - it just seems to fall on the shoulders of the mom and as a result, you need more time to plan that. They get to play golf and do all those nice things we see as the ultimate luxury. I think a lot of the time as well a mother takes on that role, not because she doesn't trust her husband or father of the child, it's just you need to feel in control; as a woman we need to know that everything, from when they wake up to when they go to sleep, we are in control; from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, that holidays are planned. That is frustrating for me because I can't always get it right, I can't plan - but it is ultimately what I would like it to be like.

The roles and skills of the manager-coach

Question 15

Right, looking at the skills and roles of the manager-coach, describe the role of the manager-coach?

I think it is exactly what it says. It's quite difficult actually. I think any manager that I have worked with has always embraced that balance. Just because you are a certain level in a company, doesn't mean that you can manage people well or that you can necessarily coach people well either. Some people can do it and some people can't do it, but I think the

combination is very important because your manager is your manager/boss whereas your coach takes a more holistic look at your life, so I see it more as a mentoring role and through the way they manage you, it plays a mentorship role. But I think people development plays a huge role in teaching managers how to do that because not everyone can do it and it's vital because you need to be having those conversations with your manager all the time so you can plan things and address them as and when they need to be, instead of sitting at the end of the year with 10 problems you were not aware of. With your manager-coach, it should be a genuine – with genuine concerns if you are having problems in the job or problems at home - so I think it is very much a holistic look at how you are coping.

Question 16

Okay and what do you think the manager-coach does that helps working women?

What they have done or what they should be doing?

It's more present tense because then some of the questions will go more to the future tense and what they should be doing.

Okay, I think it is very much a supportive role.

This is quite general because afterwards I am going to ask about you.

I think it is very supportive role because, if you know it's fine to be achieving your work-life balance and doing what you need to do to get there, and if your manager supports you then you have won the battle because they are on your side; and I mean if they understand what you are trying to achieve and why you are trying to achieve it, then it helps.

Question 17 and 18

And I know we have touched on it but there are a couple of questions that sound similar but sort of build on each other, so what could your manager do to assist you, then what does your manager do to assist you in optimising work-life balance, so you can collapse those if you want to, and then it's what role could your manager-coach play in the future to optimise work like balance.

So the first one is what could your manager coach do to assist you to achieve work-life balance?

It's about having conversations, I might say this is the way I might want to do it, but I think if my manager has suggestions on how I could do it better, because they see it from a completely different view, that gives me other options, so I think also challenging me. I might see things completely differently to the way they see things, so giving support and also giving options. I might be seeing things in a certain way and I might be missing out on a lot of things because I am not seeing the bigger picture whereas from my manager's point of view, they might see other possibilities that I might not even be seeing. I think from a manager's position, it is quite an unselfish role because you need to look out for your team and offer other possibilities and solutions, very much like conversations and coming up with ideas together.

Great, anything else?

No

Question 19

Okay, so what role - future looking - do you think your manager could play in optimising work-life balance even further?

I think it is obviously quite a new thing, so achieving this is sort of trial and error - we try things and if it doesn't work, then we try something else, so being open to suggestions and honest as well, so if it is not working, tell me and we will come up with another solution. Previously, I have never really got bad feedback - constructive feedback - and as hard as it is to receive it, it is vital as there are always weak points that need to be pointed out to you, so it's open and honest communication on an ongoing basis and having those difficult conversations as well. Then also from my side, being able to give, but it works both ways. I think if your manager understands what you are trying to achieve with your work-life balance, then I think it helps because it's not just a matter of 'I want to work from home because I want to sit in my Pajamas all day', so I think also from their side, seeing that it actually is working and it's not just your taking, you are giving, because it's a give and take situation and giving continuously from both sides and also both sides giving open and honest feedback on things that are not working.

Anything else that could be done in the future to optimise work-life balance?

I suppose it also very much depends on how my career shapes itself, so obviously your manager has the mindset that things aren't set in stone and they are open to suggestions at any time, so obviously if your job description is changing and you need to travel more or be at home more, that your manager is willing to look at that, have a give and take and open mind and are open to possibilities.

Question 20 and 21

What effect do you think your manager-coaching conversations have on your work-life balance currently?

I must say, up to now my coffee conversation history hasn't been great, so obviously you talk about the work-life balance – that is ultimately when you talk about it but I think it happens more regularly now so I do have the opportunity to speak to him and say this is working and this isn't working. I have just got to a point now where I have made a conscious decision where, if something is not working for me then I need to be honest about it and my manager is fantastic like that, he is very open to suggestions and it's very much on a trial basis, if something is not working then he will be very honest with me and say it's not working, you need to be here, we need to try something else and he is not the type of person to micromanage, he is quite happy if the job is done.

So if the job is done then he is happy.

Yes, on the actual work side of things, my manager is not really one to challenge, well not me anyway, he doesn't manage people well from 'they need to be challenged here', it's more about getting the job done and it is a reactive job for all of us at the moment. We are all trying to really push the proactive side of things more but it hasn't been happening, so now that (executive manager) is here, that has to change quite significantly and that has been quite frustrating and I don't think my manager has managed it at all well, as hard as it is. It doesn't help to have coffee conversations and he says that everything is going right.

So it ties back in with what you said earlier about not getting constructive feedback?

You can't be told that you are doing everything right - you can't possibly be doing everything right anyway, it's impossible. My manager is very good on the softer side of things, so when it comes to family issues or home matters, he is very supportive and will give you whatever you need, and at work as well, he gives us a lot of freedom but that doesn't actually mean we are growing in our jobs. I don't want to be sitting here in 5 years time thinking I still haven't

achieved anything and still sitting in the same position that I was 5 years ago. So I think it is also a manager's responsibility to be looking out for you and holding onto people and growing them. I mean especially with the diversity of our company there are so many opportunities coming up, I think it is up to them, and to you as well, but obviously they are exposed to a hell of a lot more than we are. But if opportunities do arise that you might possibly be interested in or that you might possibly enjoy, then they should suggest it, even if it is not right, just so you know they are looking out for you.

Anything else with regards to the effective manager-coach conversations on your work-life balance?

I think they mustn't just be booked in the diary for the sake of it, they should be genuine and sincere conversations and be about discussing all possibilities, it should also be a regular thing, I don't think we should have a conversation booked and then get to it and you have nothing to talk about. I think it's also up to the manager to come to that conversation with ideas and constructive feedback which means you are getting something out of it. I think a lot of the time coffee conversations happen because it's just a nice to have. So they should be prepared for, I think, and not just 'oh yes I forgot about that', you should know at least a day or two before and take the attitude – 'this is important and I need to plan for it' and look back on what was discussed previously. To me, work-life balance is something that changes all the time, your needs change all the time and nothing is set in stone, so to get that work-life balance is a matter of having conversations all the time so that you are on top of things and if necessary, plan around it. Looking at situations like (woman's name), her needs changed completely, since she had issues with her child her needs have changed totally and through continuous conversation there are no surprises, they have come up with plans on how they can work around things so it works for both sides.

I know going forward with my daughter, as she gets older, her needs are going to change, so I think it is an ongoing process and you want your manager to be aware of everything so that you can keep on top of that balance.

Question 22

Then organisationally, what role do you think manager-coach conversations could have in the future?

I suppose, from a strategic point of view, organisations look at a business and look at the next 5 years and how things are going to change in the business climate and I suppose from a work-life balance perspective, they need to understand the working needs and how they change, so that they are also adaptable around it, again playing that supportive role.

Question 23

Describe if you think there is any connection between manager-coaching conversations and the retention of woman in the workplace?

I think it is a vital role of retaining woman in the workplace, because if you are having continuous conversations with your manager and they understand what you are trying to achieve in your work and your work-life balance, then the possibility of you staying with the company for longer is that much greater. If you are not having those conversations, you are going to feel frustrated and they feel like they are not getting you and ultimately you will leave, so yes I think it plays a huge role; then also that you are having the right conversations. Then also, managers need to be trained on how to make you feel comfortable, so that you can talk about things, no matter how difficult they are and having the confidence to say what you need to say, no matter how difficult they are.

Now I want you to pick up on that when we get to the skills questions - anything else around retention?

You know, if your needs are being fulfilled, it's not a woman thing but if your needs are being fulfilled and you have work-life balance and you are getting that right, then there is no need for you to be looking for another job. Then if the communication is open and clear for both sides, then it's sort of a no brainer.

Then I think it also obviously depends on the person, you get people who stay in a job for 20 years and some people chop and change, but I think some of that is because they are unhappy in the job, but some if it is the nature of the person, it is about the culture of the company and the people and it's about enjoying your job. I don't think leaving the company is even an option for me, so you want to be able to continue to have that excitement of coming to work and knowing that the possibility of getting the balance right is realistic and not just something that it might be nice to have one day, it is a possibility. I remember sitting with a senior manager about two months ago and he asked 'what can the organisation do to make your life better?', it's just amazing, it's basically saying well what do you want, it's amazing!

Question 24, 25 and 26

Absolutely, then in enabling that process and in the manager coaching conversations, what skills does your manager-coach display? Then what would you expect him to display and what could he do more or less of?

When you say skills, would you say the ability to manage a conversation?

Yes, those sorts of things but particularly around the manager-coaching conversations, so you say managing the conversation, it might be things like accessibility, you said you haven't had a good track record with conversations and I know it's because of the lack of them happening, so what skills would you expect of the manager-coach in those conversations or what skills do they display?

We set up conversations and have them, they are booked and he is always available. I would expect him to be able to have a difficult conversation –

This is skills he does display?

Yes, he does on the softer issues display having those difficult conversations, quite openly and he is comfortable with it but I think more difficult conversations he also does

comfortably. Then from a work point of view, he handles things quite well I think, if there is an issue he will address it quite openly and be quite honest and direct about it.

What he is not good at is managing times for the coffee conversations, for example, if it is cancelled, he is not proactive about rescheduling it. I mean who is supposed to organize them? I think he should follow up more if the conversation is cancelled. I think he needs to show more concern – I don't have a lot of conversations with my manager really, I just think the conversations need to be more valuable and not just it's in the diary let's just do it.

Any other skills he does display in the actual conversations, how he comes across and what he does or doesn't do?

Sometimes he is good at being genuine about things and sometimes he is not but that largely depends on his mood.

Okay

I think he should be able to manage that, if you have that hour or whatever it is, then he should concentrate on you, he is easily distracted so it's almost to me, if it is not beneficial for him then it stops, so from that point of view it doesn't feel genuine, it's just tick the list then it's done.

Skills wise he has good conversation skills and he does address difficult situations.

So how genuine he is depends on his mood, so what would you expect from a manager-coach, is it this or is it this and more?

They need to be confident that they are happy to host the coffee conversation, I think also just to make you feel that they want to be there, it's important as part of our culture, you want to be there. I am also guilty of it, but it is an important thing and it is a matter of - you need to plan for this - and I think if there is nothing to be said, then you shouldn't just be having it. It should involve general chit chat as well, but it should also include issues that

need to be addressed and I can't imagine you would never have something to talk about because there is always something on the go. I think a big skill from a manager's point of view is offering solutions and looking out for possibilities and suggesting things and also just challenging you a bit, not just asking you questions, it has to be looking to the future as well.

Okay any other skills that he currently displays or that he could do more of or less of?

I think I have got everything.

Anything else, comments or general thoughts, related to this or anything that has cropped up while we have spoken?

I hope I can achieve a work-life balance! It's a relatively new thing for me, I must be honest, and I suppose working with people development quite closely and understanding why we are putting all these things in place has given me more understanding. Then given my personal circumstances, I am learning to take a different perspective on achieving work-life balance and ultimately if you can achieve it, then you are going to be much happier. Sure, marketing is the type of job that is very conducive to peaks and troughs and you are going to have busier times and quieter times and you just have to work around that, but generally, it is really something that is on my mind all the time, work is not everything and my child comes first.

I also realized if I am happier at work then she is happier, so it's learning to put myself first in front of other people which I generally have never done, so that's hard for me, adapting to that and it is a slow process, I realize it is not something that just happens overnight, so try it and if it doesn't work then there is no 'I told you so', I realize I have the support. Then I think it also comes from stepping out of an old job and into a new job and just seeing things from a different perspective, giving advice to someone else makes you understand, you don't have to put up a hand, just do it, just get it done. So take the initiative and if you have an idea and someone ploughs it down, then at least you learn and know where you stand.

Excellent, thank you

Pleasure

The interviewer thanks the respondent and closes the interview.