

The Juggle Is Real; Work/Life Balance is a Myth

Career Development



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The road to “success”

I have been practicing law for over 20 years now. Last fall, for a business class I was taking, the professor asked us to reflect on the influences to our leadership style. I recalled early influences of parents, teachers, and family. I thought about the more unexpected influence of the industries I worked in and how the workplaces and my own experience influenced my career and leadership.

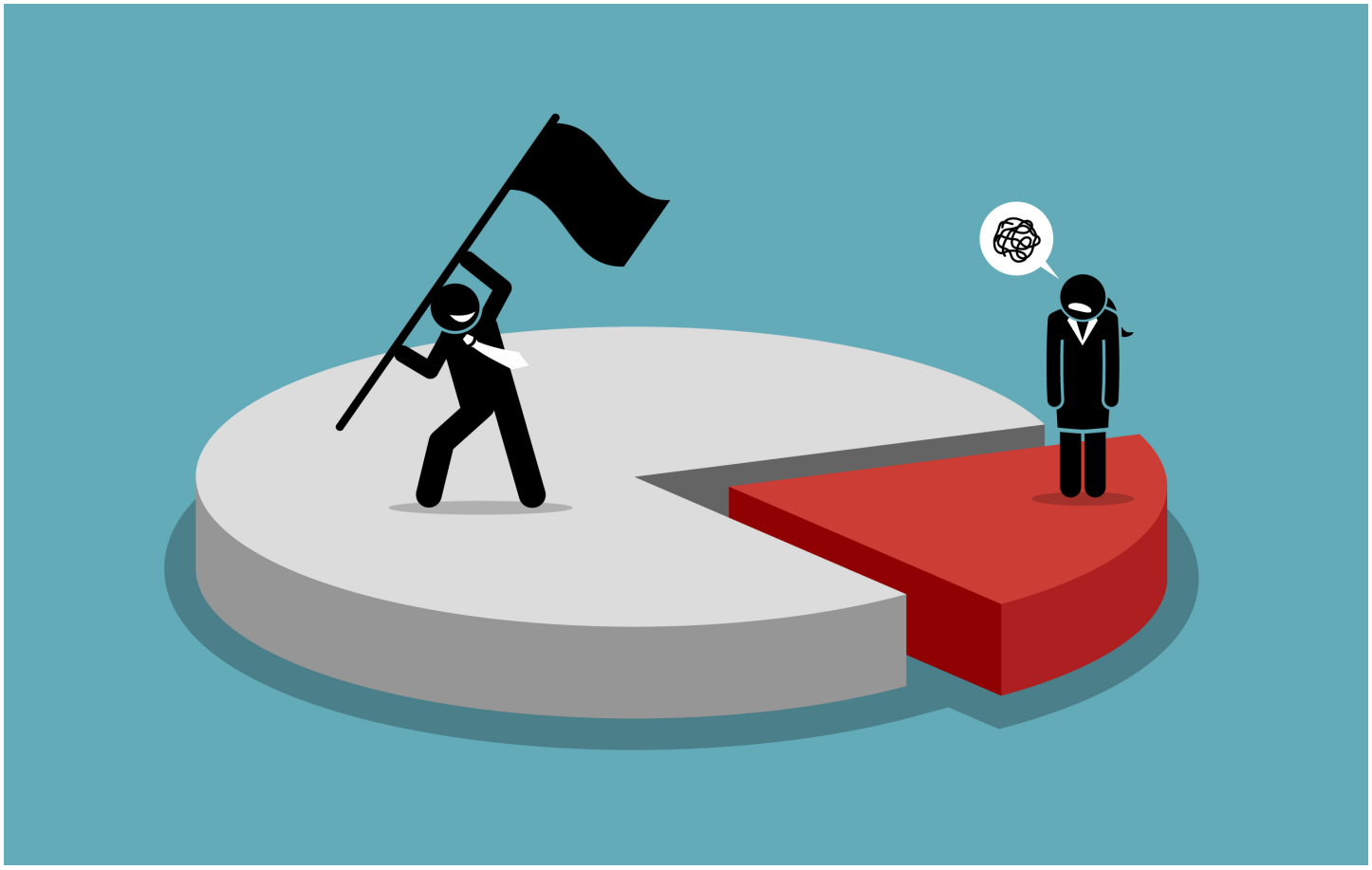
By most accounts, I am successful; I have learned valuable lessons along the way that I hope can be helpful to others. I am sharing my reflections to help others — or at least provide some comfort — when the proverbial hill seems too daunting to climb.

When I graduated law school, my class was 50 percent male and 50 percent female. When I started work as a first-year associate in a “Wall Street” law firm in New York City, my first-year class was 50 percent male and 50 percent female. But when I looked further up the ranks of the law firm partnership, the *only* female equity partner (what I perceived was the ultimate aspiration) at the law firm was a divorced mom of two.

As a young and ambitious 20-something, I did not yet understand how difficult it would be to achieve my goals — that is, having a successful and prestigious career with a family and social life. I did not appreciate the challenges I would encounter at so many junctures along the way. Young and naïve, I was confident I could be an exception to the challenges of women navigating the workplace.

Beating the odds

As time and my career progressed, I looked around and there were fewer and fewer women. There were fewer women in my second-year class, fewer in my third year, and by the time, I was up for partner several years later, I was the only woman in my cohort.



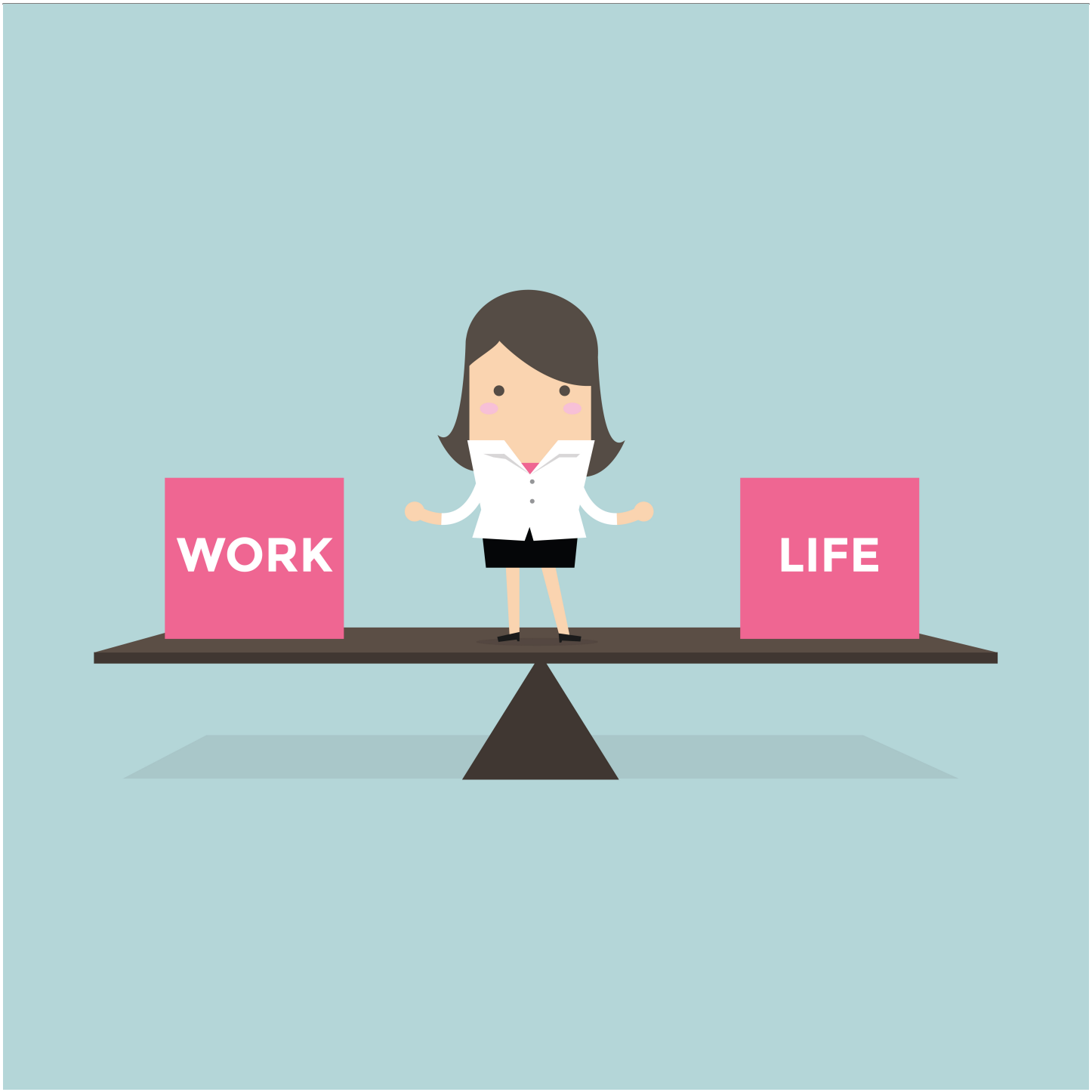
Gender inequality remains a current issue many women face during their careers. Leremy / *Shutterstock.com*

There were subtle disparities in the opportunities my male counterparts got; in hindsight, it was all under the surface (like high profile projects being handed out in men's room or on the golf course). Subtle enough that if I raised a concern, it could likely have been explained away but overt enough that with each passing slight, the goalposts for success seemed further away.

I left private practice in 2011 and took an in-house opportunity. Being in-house did not change my aspirations for success. My talent and perseverance in-house led to more career accomplishments, and I earned what I thought was the ultimate aspiration of in-house practice, general counsel.

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There were many sacrifices throughout my career (which is not over by the way). In addition to achieving what I perceived to be professional success, I met my husband and together we were fortunate enough to have two daughters. Caring for a family while also practicing in a law firm taught me work/life balance was a myth. Women of my generation could have everything, we were told. It was possible to "balance" a successful and demanding career with a family, they said. As I tried to have it all, I now know that balance and having it all is a fallacy.



Some people struggle more with work/life balance than others. WindAwake / *Shutterstock.com*

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Women (and men) cannot have it all at the same time. Being a successful working mom/wife/daughter/sister/friend is a juggle. There will always be sacrifices and competing priorities.

Life is a series of seasons, and each season brings different challenges. For me, each season has required a slightly different juggle, a rearrangement of priorities, and a different sacrifice. One ball is almost always close to the ground while the others are being shuffled around at higher altitudes with greater focus and attention. I know my family has carried the weight of my career choices and they have sacrificed with me, playing part in helping keep the various balls in the air; never letting anything (or anyone) hit the ground too hard or for too long.

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Give yourself grace

What I have observed is that my experience — success in traditionally male dominated industries and struggling to find the ever-elusive “balance” of work and life — are not unique to me. My perspective and leadership is influenced by my experience. I can provide a more realistic insight to “work/life” than the fairytale images I had. As a coworker and leader, I have greater empathy and understanding for the individual, recognizing that the seasons of life within a career matter. If career and work are part of the juggle, I can try to show grace for times when the other priorities need more, and the pull is too strong to sacrifice.

None of these things are easy to do, and maybe that is the greatest lesson to share. We should each have appreciation for our successes and grace for the times where the juggle got the best of us. A social media curated view of my professional success and snapshots of life experiences - being a mom to two incredible girls - it may seem that I have achieved the impossible balance my generation was promised. I am here to tell you, in fact, I have not. Many days, I have perfected the art of imbalance. I give myself grace to manage the juggle as best I can with *as much* help as possible.

My help has come from a variety of sources — an incredibly supportive partner; outsourcing things like meal preparation, laundry service, shuttling kids; family support, and friends who can help in a pinch. I try to provide grace to my team by letting them know that each of their careers is much longer than any one season. Being out on maternity leave for six, nine, or 12 months seems like a lifetime to a working mom but as a manager, it is a blip in time, and we get through it. Moms (and dads) should take as much time as they can with new babies because they can't get that time back. I have a similar approach for other circumstances that take people away from having work as the highest priority.



Sometimes it takes a village to assist new parents with creating a healthy work/life balance. Softulka / *Shutterstock.com*

For anyone struggling for balance out there, I urge you to do the same: Find your own juggle, try not to drop everything at the same time, ask for help and get comfortable with the idea that the juggle is real, and the balance you are striving for is actually a myth.

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