



Achieving Balance – Reawakening the Dream

By Mark D. Sauter, author, *Bringing Meaning into Monday™*

“The fall of the American Dream may be inevitable. We Americans may find ourselves grossly out of step with the changes taking place all around us as the human race enters a global era.”

- Jeremy Rifkin, author
The European Dream

Like a teeter-totter, a healthy life requires balance in order to make the ride enjoyable. *Self* or material interests (e.g., wealth, status, consumption) represent one side (A), while relationship quality and contributing value to the lives of *others* reflects the other side (B). Many people, organizations, and American society for that matter, have become over-reliant on side A. They believe this side holds the key to realizing the American Dream, the answer to happiness, the definition of success.

This is not wrong; however it is incomplete. Side A reflects only one side of a healthy society. The American Dream, while providing the individual freedom to pursue wealth, was also based upon *service to others* principles.

Interestingly, this view is reinforced in the groundbreaking work of Adam Smith. In his classic *Wealth of Nations* (1776), which set the early tone for capitalism, Smith showed how it was possible to achieve private gain (side A) in ways that would further not just individual interests but, “*by an invisible hand*,” those of society (side B). In essence, individuals are materially rewarded, and the well-being of society is improved, by producing things that people value.

Why Now

Few people would deny the material prosperity found in the American Dream; yet for purposes here it’s also important to recognize the societal costs. Since 1960, while average disposable income in America increased over two-fold (taking inflation into account), depression has increased anywhere from 3-10 times, violent crime rate increased 4 times, the prison population has escalated 5 times, and teen suicides have increased 3 times¹. Statistics such as these suggest not all is well. Unfortunately, there’s more.

Each day in America, 2,482 children are confirmed as abused or neglected, 4,356 are arrested, and 16,964 public school students are suspended. America, when compared to twenty-five other industrialized countries, ranks first in GDP, defense expenditures, and the number of millionaires and billionaires. Yet they rank dead last in protecting children against gun violence, twenty-third in infant mortality, and eighteenth in the percent of children living in poverty².

Today’s institutions, business and civic, must assume some accountability for both the problem and more importantly the solution. Progress cannot necessarily be slowed; yet a more sustainable approach is required. While family, friends or faith will continue to influence ones overall quality of life, work, given the amount of time spent there, has a profound effect.

Many employees are physically and mentally depleted when they leave work. The effects of challenging work relationships leave people emotionally drained. And people who lack a strong sense of purpose are frequently disengaged. As a result many people are frustrated, exhausted, unhappy and unfilled. People, and organizations for that matter, are too busy juggling multiple plates. They are pursuing the American or material dream by working harder and harder versus establishing a sense of focus or purpose; i.e., working smarter. Taking time to understand what work is still valued and what work can be eliminated. Focusing on the important issues, the real needs, would allow them to achieve more by doing less – improving profitability, innovation and growth (side A), while simultaneously improving engagement, teamwork, service and relationship quality (side B).

To achieve this balance, leaders must revisit hierarchical and historic practices and beliefs, seeking new ways to speed decision making, increase empowerment, improve communications, and emotionally engage their workforce. As a result, not only will performance improve but so will overall work/life quality. Positive energy generated at work will carryover into society, making families stronger and quite possibly increasing voluntarism in terms of time, talent and treasure. This will result in healthier people, healthier organizations and healthier communities by reawakening the other side of the American Dream. *Bringing Meaning into Monday™* offers a process that can help institutions achieve it.

¹ *The Progress Paradox*, Gregg Easterbrook, 2003

² Children’s Defense Fund, *State of America’s Children* 2005

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