

The Myth of Work-Life Balance with Danna Greenberg (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Hi, Danna. Welcome to work. Better.

Danna Greenberg: Hi, Chris, it's great to be here. I'm looking forward to our conversation today.

Chris Congdon: Well, I'm really looking forward to it because I find your work so interesting. I think our listeners are going to, too.

You explore the intersection of some of the most important things in our lives, work, family, and community. And you focus on how individuals kind of get through the work-life transitions that go on. And right now, one of the biggest things we're hearing from people at work is this whole issue of like work-life balance, or at least it's a common phrase that's used to describe some of the things that people are struggling with. And so I'd like to just kind of go back to how you even got into thinking about this as an area of exploration in your work, Dana.

Danna Greenberg: So there are 2 parts to that story. One is personal for sure. I think you can't study work life without some personal aspect of it influencing you and for me, that actually takes me all the way back to my college years, and I had the unfortunate experience in the time of college, of having my only sibling pass away in a boating accident.

It was shaped for me so much about how I then approached my life and my career. And all of the career choices that I was making were based upon interest and excitement for doing passionate work, but also for making work work within my life. I never took a job, I never chose a PhD program, I never chose my 1st academic position simply on the idea that if I do this for a few years it's going to help me get somewhere else, and I'm going to pay my dues. It was always need to make sure I'm living life in a way that's full for me, and that fullness has to do with both what I do in my work and what I do outside of my work. And so there was this natural interest and desire.

It took a little bit of time before I was willing to integrate those ideas into my academic research and what became then really interesting for me is both the what I study, but how I study it. So as I started to then do all this research on work family, particularly some of my early projects a couple of decades ago, were looking at women and their entry into work, following a maternity leave. A lot of people were talking about work-family conflict, and how our work is so time consuming and engaging that we don't have time for our family, and the idea that women feel guilty about leaving their child at home.

And what was fascinating for me in my research was that as I was talking to women about the return to work, they would whisper things to me like, "I'm so excited to be back at work" "Being at work actually makes me better as a mother," right? Or actually, "I think now that I'm a mother, there are ways that I'm better at work," and these were things they were saying behind a closed door, in these very quiet, whispery voices, and I started to get really interested in this idea of, "Wow! There's something we're not talking about here" about the way that being engaged at work can make us better at life and being engaged at life can make us better at work. So it's both a question of what I study and how I approach the study of it. And so a lot of my work is really interested in this idea of what's the positive reciprocal relationship between work and life.

Chris Congdon: What I find so fascinating is you're breaking a myth for me, or at least it was what I learned early in my career, which is that you keep your work and your life separate. Meaning, you know, like, when I show up for work, whatever's going on at home in my personal life, like you shut the door on that, and that stays away, because that would, you know, disrupt work.

And similarly, I mean, you know, people would talk about their careers outside of work, but you know, it just felt like there was this bifurcation that the two should never come together. And so what I'm hearing you say, and I'd love for you to elaborate on this a little bit is that it's a good thing, actually for some of my non-working life to integrate in some way with my work-life like, give us some advice on that one.

Danna Greenberg: Absolutely. and I think that advice of the separation you're talking about is very much advice many of us got of a certain age. I'm not going to say how old I am right now, but I think that's very much what we were told, and both men and women right, that there's this importance of keeping them separate. And we've changed that assumption about it and, as you say, and ask the question, "so what are the ways in which we see this positive reciprocal relationship?" And I want to go back to something you said when we started the conversation was this idea of balance. I actually don't talk about balance ever, and if there was anything I could get rid of it would be the idea that there is work-life balance, or that organizations should be working to help people have work-life balance.

Balance kind of suggests this idea that I'm able to hold 2 parts of my life in perfect harmony and timing, and we all know that work is messy and life is messy, and that's an ideal that most of us can't ever achieve. Right. There are going to be times that maybe I'm going to be really engaged in my work. It's something I'm passionate about in certain moments, and there's going to be times that I might have crises in my family, or there might be times things are happening in my broader community that I really want to get involved in, and so that I'm shifting over time, my energy and my focus but that ultimately there are ways that I'm creating a positive energy between the 2 places of my life. Right? Ruth Bader Ginsburg has a classic quote that explains this, and she talked about the fact that she thinks she was so successful as a law student because she had a child at home to take care of. And so when she talked about this idea that at 5 o'clock she had to end her day to take care of her child, and then she would come back to her books at night, and the idea of having a break meant that difficult, thorny problem or case that she was studying or working on, she came back to with new perspective, with new energy and interest for the work she was doing.

That's just one of the many ways that having outside interests can actually energize and activate new aspects of our brain because we have the break, or we bring in new ideas and new information into the work we're doing.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, is it helpful additionally to again, not only like kind of step away from the problem, as you're saying, but also kind of to have that deadline for yourself at the end of the day? Like, if you know that like, "Hey, I have to switch gears at a certain point. I've got to kind of focus and get some things done while I'm here." Does that help as well? Or is that just another source of pressure in our lives?

Danna Greenberg: I don't want to say it's not a source of pressure in our lives, because certainly times and deadlines can be sources of pressure. But one of the things that we found in our research again, talking particularly with parents who often have these very time-based deadlines, particularly with younger children and childcare kinds of responsibilities, they actually talk. It makes them a better manager of those time deadlines.

For instance, the idea that I need to do everything myself versus. I need to delegate it if I'm time based, and I know I have certain deadlines I need to achieve, I'm more comfortable delegating things to other people, because I can't do everything myself.

Or I'm not going to micromanage people as much. I'm going to give them a little bit more freedom to do things their way again, not because I might not have those tendencies to over control someone, but I don't have the ability to do it, because I know I need to leave. And so people actually shift the way they manage their team when they have those 10 deadlines in ways that we know makes them better managers.

Chris Congdon: Sure. Well, for the listeners here who aren't leading teams, are there ways to delegate or share the workload, you know, if you're not in a position of authority, but you just recognize that like "I can't do it all"?

Danna Greenberg: One of the things that can be really helpful is relying on your other team members when you can't do it all right. So building some positive relationships, some strong relationships with team members can be a way that you can share responsibilities, right? Maybe you're going to ask somebody to help you today, but you know, next time you're going to be there to help them as well. And so, being thoughtful about that idea of reciprocity in the relationship is one way to maybe not delegate per se, but ask for help when you have those kinds of time, deadlines and structures.

Chris Congdon: Sure, that's really helpful. I want to go back to what you were talking about a moment ago, you know the outside activities from work so obviously parenting, of course, is one of them, but there's so many other things that people have in their lives, community involvement, whether they're on a board or hobbies, or those kinds of things.

So you might be able to coach me on this one, because I'm wondering now, after I've been at it for a few years whether I've made a mistake. So my husband and I kind of divided and conquered where he was, the at-home parent and I was at work, and so he did all the kind of community involvement. And then I was just hunkered down at work. Work work work. And I'm wondering if, from some of your research, if you're seeing that actually, there's benefit to organizations and to employees if people are having those interests outside of work that they're not just saying, "Oh, somebody else, you do that part of the family work, and I'll do the paid employment part."

Danna Greenberg: I love the fact that you talked about both the family and the community, right? Because not everybody is focused on family. That's not the piece of everybody's careers, right? And this is the idea of organizations really recognizing that experiences outside of work make people better in their workplace, right? And it's not just this idea of we're enabling people to have lives outside of work, but we recognize that by having that life outside of work it can help somebody be more effective. So, for example, one of the things you mentioned is the idea of board work. Okay, so we'll stick with you and your partner for a minute. Right? Let's say you did divide the responsibilities in that way. And he was primarily focused on family. There could be other places that you could focus your energy. So, for example, we've done some research, a colleague and I, Wendy Murphy, on nonprofit board work and individuals who are working full time, but have taken on nonprofit board work. And again, what we find for those individuals is that when you are working on a nonprofit board, you're working with a group of people who are all leaders and powerful in their own right. And so, as a leader, you actually have to learn how to influence things differently. You can't just tell people what to do. They're not going to listen to you on a board.

Chris Congdon: Right.

Danna Greenberg: You have to learn how to negotiate differently, how to handle conflicts differently, how to influence differently. And the leaders that we've talked to talk about the idea that having and developing those skills changes then internally, how they lead in their organizations, and they lead in a way that they share authority better, and they are better at building a stronger team and building relationships with people across the organization and cross-functional capacity. So that's an example of that kind of activity. I've done other work with a colleague, Rob Cross and Karen Dillon, where we've actually found that being deeply engaged in some activities outside of work can help you build your resilience at work.

Chris Congdon: Oh, interesting! Talk about that.

Danna Greenberg: So we talk about resilience often that the idea that as an individual I have resilience, but building relationships in and out of the workplace can actually help people become more resilient.

Chris Congdon: Hmm.

Danna Greenberg: For example, getting engaged in a hobby or a leisure activity where you're learning something new, you're making mistakes, you're having setbacks, you're having to rely on different people to help you grow and learn, teaches you a different way of handling loss and failure and mistakes that you bring back into the organization context. So you can handle those mistakes in a very different kind of way, relying on your colleagues in a different way. So it teaches you a different approach for recovering from failure and setbacks.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, so interesting. It connects with something that we've been talking a lot about. So we've been thinking a lot about, how do you create community at work? And what we mean by that is, it's really on two levels. Of course, communities are often places where people live and workplaces, you know, can be kind of the work equivalent of our neighborhoods and our physical communities, but also communities being relationships that we have with other people.

And so much of the work that we've been doing and looking into the benefits of community comes back to this topic of resilience, that strong communities are inherently more resilient, that they can face crises better together because of the interconnectedness. How does that sound to you from your perspective with your research?

Danna Greenberg: So it aligns with my research for sure. And one thing I caution organizations from doing is feeling that they have to be the sole place for community.

I think there's something we need to be thinking about here. We've been counting a lot on organizations to build community. We're talking a lot, for example, now about workplace loneliness. Both are really important issues for us to be thinking about, but organizations can't solve all that themselves. They can't create the community for people. They can't solve workplace loneliness, they certainly can address some of it.

The other thing they can address, though, is the buffer aspect. If people have community and lives outside of work and relationships outside of work, they're not relying on work to be everything for them. And in a lot of ways that takes the pressure off of the company or the organization to feel that they have to be doing everything for the employee to make sure the employee does have a community to make sure the employee does have friends and positive relationships and isn't experiencing workplace loneliness.

When individuals have strong communities outside of work that can create a balance for needing all of that from the workplace. And so, again, that's idea of thinking about workplaces and making sure people have healthy, thriving lives outside of work that buffer them from the challenges they're going to experience in the workplace, or some of the loneliness we may experience in the workplace.

Chris Congdon: Sure that I mean, that feels really tough, though, right now, because, you know, there's so much out there that's talking about how people are less likely to join clubs, join organizations that they used to, that they used to do.

Eric Kleinenberg did great research about how people are choosing to live alone more often, and, you know, goes into some suggestions about how people might live their lives differently in that way. But it feels like, and I think we do feel this pressure where we live, you know, from a Steelcase perspective, because we help create workplaces that, like workplaces often do feel like it's 1 of the few places where we intersect with people who are different from us, or you know, we have to cooperate with people who might have different worldviews so I mean, like, how I hear what you're saying, like an organization can't take all that burden on themselves. But at the same time it does feel like that's a phenomenon that's going on with society right now.

Danna Greenberg: So what I would say for organizations is, they can't take all of that responsibility. And as individuals we don't want organizations to take all of that responsibility, right? If we look over the course of our lives on average, we're going to be changing jobs every 3 to 5 years. Right. Most people today will be involved in 8 to 10 different organizations through their lifetime. We certainly want to capitalize and learn from the opportunity of working with different people in any particular organization. We want to build positive relationships within the organization. Those are going to help us feel better about the work we're doing, feel more positive about our work, and be more productive in the workplace.

But we don't want to solely structure our lives around those relationships in that organization because they are transient, right? And we need to find other things that maybe are permanent. I don't think anything's permanent in our lives but are more consistent, and can be there for us as we transition in and out of different organizations.

Chris Congdon: I want to shift the subject a tiny bit to talk about a topic that a lot of our, I'm sure a lot of our listeners are thinking about. I know a lot of our clients are thinking about, you know, since the pandemic we continue to struggle years later with what is the right expression of hybrid work and flexibility. We know that it's all over the news that some leading organizations are expecting people to be in the office more often than ever and I don't want to get into the kind of that debate, because I think you know that that's a discussion that could go on forever, but in general, as we're trying to figure out the right level of flexibility, do you have thoughts on that from your research that would be kind of good advice to leaders and organizations?

Danna Greenberg: So work like workplace flexibility isn't a new topic, right? Again, we've been studying workplace flexibility for decades, and it's something that we know for a long time employees were desperate for. We knew that having more flexibility at work enabled people to better manage the intersection of work and family or working community to feel less conflict, to actually be more productive in the workplace.

And at the same time we knew organizations weren't interested in it. There were something we called idiosyncratic deals, where individuals might quietly, in private, negotiate flexibility for themselves. Organizations might have some policies for solely working parents around flexibility. But it wasn't widespread, and what's exciting post-pandemic is this idea that it is much more widespread. The challenge is, we haven't necessarily changed some of our biases around workplace flexibility. And what I mean by that is that managers for a lot still think that people are less productive if they're not being seen doing their work. So the idea that someone who is working from home can be just as productive of somebody in the workplace. We still have a lot of biases and we question, "are they really working when they say they're working"? You hear that a lot for managers today? Or "I don't think they're doing a good job, but I don't really know for sure". And so, while we have flexibility, we haven't necessarily bought into the idea that people really can be productive with flexibility.

And so that means that we, as managers, have to be thinking differently about work. How do we stop evaluating people based upon the amount of hours they put in, or the facetime that they put in? And how do we start to really think about how we evaluate them, based upon outputs more? If we start to change those attitudes, we may start to think about flexibility really differently. It may enable us to start thinking, not just about flexibility of location which we're thinking about, but actually, flexibility of time. People have different structures and patterns to their day. Not all jobs have that ability to have flexible time, but can managers embrace flexible time. What's fascinating to me is post-pandemic we embrace place. We haven't embraced flexibility of time in any way which again says to me, we're still biased against that.

So in the return to work conversation, this new mandate of return to work. We're going to return to work 5 days a week again, I think gets back to that idea that we haven't given up some of those inherent biases around flexibility.

Chris Congdon: The time thing is interesting, like, we've seen some patterns, not our work, but Microsoft's work they're becoming what they're calling like a triple peak within the workday, like there used to be big peaks of activity like before lunch and after lunch. And now what they were finding is that there's a 3rd peak emerging that's in the evening hours, like, you know, people are working throughout the typical business day later on, you know, they're getting back online or doing meetings, and you know whether that's healthy or not. I don't know. I have mixed feelings about it, but it is interesting that it's showing that at least people might be leading some of that flexibility in terms of saying, hey, maybe I needed to leave the office a little early, for whatever reason. I had kids to transport, or I had an appointment, or I had a board meeting, whatever it is. You know that people are starting to be more flexible.

Danna Greenberg: So I think flexibility of time is absolutely critical. Let me start with that. When we look at the mismatch between a workday and a school day, we look at the lack of childcare in this country. Flexibility of time is really important for workers to be able to have these integrated lives. And we need to be really careful about how we manage those. So, for example, I'm someone who has some odd work hours I always have, it's because I'm deeply involved in a couple of community activities that sometimes take some time in the afternoon. I like to work in the evenings. I don't have young children at home. It's easy for me to do.

I also have a tagline on my email, and it says, "please respond during your normal work hours." You know, your normal work hours may look very different from my normal work hours, and so again, in my current role where I'm managing 30 faculty members, it's very important for them to realize and think just because they might get something from me at night. I'm not expecting them to work the way I work. And so as a leader, it means, if you're going to have that flexibility of time again, you need to be more thoughtful, more proactive about how you're helping people manage their own boundaries. And recognizing that we don't want to go to an environment where people are available 24/7 That detracts from the very thing we were trying to start the conversation on.

Chris Congdon: That makes so much sense. So one other thing that I really wanted to talk with you about, I know so much of your work focuses on parenting a lot on motherhood, of course, and and the lessons that all of us whether we're parenting young children or I'm in a life stage where I have an elderly father that's also kind of part of the whole situation. So I'm just curious what you think the benefit is, you know, that we can apply from caregiving, and whatever role it is like how can we apply that into work?

Danna Greenberg: So there's a couple of things we've already talked about, and a couple of other things we haven't, that we see from our research. One of those things is empathy and perspective taking. It can be very hard in our jobs in an organization, whether you're managing people, whether you're working on a team to recognize that people have very different perspectives on how to get things done, and how do we be empathetic to those perspectives? How do we listen to them? How do we give people a chance to have their voice heard? When we're in caretaking roles those are actually skills we start to develop as caregivers whether you're working with a young child, whether you're working with an elder care, whether you're working with somebody broader in your community, and you're doing some caregiving capacities.

We know from research people talk about the fact that they bring that empathy and that perspective taking into their experiences at work, and it makes them better in how they interact and engage with their colleagues.

Chris Congdon: It's interesting, as you put it that way, because I think one of the skills I'm developing with my father is my listening skills because he's struggling with hearing. And so I end up being his interpreter oftentimes and so I'm finding that I have to really deeply listen to what some of the medical staff or care staff are saying so, then I can turn around and repeat it back to him so he can understand it.

And when I think about that in terms of work, I'm like, you know, that's something I could get better at at work is listening, because sometimes I'm distracted or I'm multitasking. So I think that that's really an interesting perspective on how that can help us in the workplace.

I'm also curious about just how parenting trends in general have kind of changed and might be shaping our workforce, you know, as we're looking more and more a multi-generational workforce, like the way I was parented is very different than the way I parent my own kids and I have a new grandbaby. I'm even watching how my daughter parents, you know, and it's like, wow, you know, we're thinking about things in similar but different ways. And I'm just curious if your research has any thoughts about, like, how our parenting styles might be impacting our newer generation of workers coming into the workforce.

Danna Greenberg: There's so much about this newer generation. And there's wonderful research being done. I have a colleague, Megan Gerhardt, who does a lot of work on intergenerational relationships in the workplace. We have to think about this generation in a couple of ways that's affecting how they even come at this conversation around work-life very differently than you and I, right? When we started I mentioned that I saw myself as an outlier in the fact that when I was crafting my early career. I was focused more on my life as well as my career. That's very different from my colleagues coming out of a women's college, or my husband, who were very much 24/7 into work. Right? So I was an outlier.

That seems to be a little bit more of the mainstream today. When we look at this generation, many of them were raised by dual two working households. Many of them were also raised under parents who were working who went through a lot of disruption. The layoffs of different periods, the lack of security around employability, the making a lot of sacrifices for work that maybe didn't realize the benefits that they had hoped. This younger generation of 20 somethings is coming into work very differently. They're not necessarily as interested in paying their dues, early on.

They're much more interested in how work fits into their lives. And in some ways those are things that organizations need to be thinking and adapting to. And at the same time, there are other ways that we need to be helping this generation recognize what they might be missing, and what I mean by example, for that is, you know, if you ask people around there about remote work, a lot of 20 somethings want fully remote jobs. They're missing a lot in fully remote jobs. When we again study the 20 somethings developing professionalism, mentoring, informal coaching, opportunity to see an entire organization and cross-functional and new career opportunities or new skill sets and new interests. They don't develop because they're predominantly working from home. Their balance of task and relationship activities is more task-focused.

And so they're missing a lot of that early career professional development that's so important in your twenties. And so as organizations think about, how do they help people develop that? They need to also educate the 20 somethings on why that's important to their careers. So some of this is accommodating the 20 somethings and what they want, and some of it is also helping them change their mindset a little bit around these things.

Chris Congdon: I think that's really good advice. I have to ask you before I let you go, because, you know we're always thinking about place. And how can places help? We know that they can't solve for everything, but there are ways that we can design workplaces that can help. So when you think about like this idea of having a full, meaningful life like, what role do you think that place, like a physical workplace can play, or that it can do better at in helping people have this, I'm not going to use the word balance, but you know, being able to kind of figure out how they have kind of a full and meaningful life and a good career at the same time?

Danna Greenberg: So when we think about the actual workplace, and this idea of the importance of relational work in the workplace, I don't want people coming into an office where they're going to be on a video conference all day, and I don't want someone coming into an office where they're going to sit in their office with their door shut and focus on tasks all day.

I want to be thinking about the workspace in a way that's building more of spontaneous as well as formal relational interaction, right? So what does that look like? So, for example, I know organizations, for example, now that have more family tables for people to eat at not just in a lunch room, but spread about across different office levels so that people can come at a big table and eat lunch and just meet other folks where organizations are thinking about what would be interesting guest lecture series. People who would come in and talk about a topic that brings people together to connect?

How do we enable people to form stronger relationships within a team? So that when we are virtual, when we have those conflicts, when we have those disagreements, we have greater trust. We have greater psychological safety in that team and then we're able to do our tasks better.

So I really think we need to think about workspace in conjunction with relationships. How do we design workspaces for more relational interaction that benefits people on the days that they're not in that workspace.

Chris Congdon: I love that. And I couldn't agree with you more. You know, we also have kind of these communal spaces. You know, where you can come together with not only people on your own team, but maybe with people that you don't see all the time. Danna, I am so grateful for the time that you gave us today to talk about this. I think your research is really fascinating, and I think for our listeners, who are parents and moms. Dana's got a great book that she co-authored called *Maternal Optimism* and I think that's going to be a really interesting read for people if you want to learn more about her work. So thank you for being here today, Danna.

Danna Greenberg: Thank you for the conversation, and thank you for the opportunity to give me of talking more about this idea of work life thriving in our lives and in our careers. So thank you.