One day, when Dave Jeppson was a senior manager at a large teaching hospital in Colorado, he received a call from the local middle school. “The principal said, ‘We need to see you; it’s about your son,’” the now-retired Jeppson recalls. “I said, ‘I can do it next week.’ And the principal said, ‘We need to see you now.’” So Jeppson walked out of a meeting, picked up his wife, and drove to the school. It seemed his son was slipping dangerously in attitude and academics.

The Holistic Healthcare Executive: Balancing Personal

“This boy has great relationships with his mother and his brothers and sister,” the school psychologist told Jeppson. “But when we try to talk about his father, we run into a stone wall. In class, he literally slips into a dream world over his lack of relationship with you.”

For Jeppson, who had been working ten-hour days, six days a week, it was a wakeup call. “I thought, I love and adore this boy, and I had no idea,” he says. “I was lost in my work.”
with higher demands

Jeppson, a past ACHE Chairman, is probably not alone in his experience. With the rapid and dramatic changes that have taken place in healthcare, the demands on its executives’ physical, mental, and emotional resources are greater than ever before. Not only must today’s healthcare leader manage 24-hour care facilities and their medical staffs, he or she must also keep abreast of and make decisions on subjects as diverse as government regulations, mergers and acquisitions, building design and construction, information technology, marketing, and insurance—all from a position of high visibility and accountability within the community. At the same time, changes in society have made it less likely that such a leader will have the “traditional” home life, with a spouse whose full-time career it is to manage the home and raise the children. Today’s healthcare executives are men and women of varying ages, married or single, perhaps sharing in the care of children or elderly parents, perhaps shouldering those responsibilities alone.

As Jeppson found out, the effective healthcare leader must develop methods for being effective at work and maintaining a healthy personal life. After the phone call from his son’s school, Jeppson immediately made changes that not only allowed him to restore his relationship with a beloved child, but also increased the time he was able to spend with his wife and family. He continued to have a successful career, becoming executive vice president and a board member at Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City. Today, healthcare executives across the country perform similarly delicate balancing acts. Here is a look at some of their strategies.

There are different things in my life, all of which have legitimate claims on my time,” Stacey says. “And I’ve got to juggle those. My family is always more important to me than work, but there are many times when I simply must attend to work issues.” The key is to make sure you do not consistently give short shrift to one area. If you have a personal commitment on your calendar for Wednesday evening and a meeting comes up, don’t automatically reach for your eraser. Ask yourself if there is an alternate way to make your contribution—for example, participating in the meeting by conference call or submitting a report in writing.

Consider Rulon Stacey, Ph.D., FACHE, found time to earn his doctorate even while serving as CEO of Poudre Valley Health System in Fort Collins, Colo., raising (with his wife) four young daughters, and participating in church and community activities. Stacey, who is ACHE’s 1999 Robert S. Hudgens Memorial Award winner for young healthcare executive of the year, says he has learned to accept the fact that priorities shift constantly.
whether there is a reasonable compromise, such as making sure the issues that most need your attention appear early on the agenda and leaving as soon as those have been addressed. If compromises do not work, decide if it would be possible to skip or reschedule the meeting.

Says Andrea Price, FACHE, vice president of professional services at Hurley Medical Center in Flint, Mich., “One of the things I’ve gotten really good at is saying no. Often, I’ll offer the name of someone else who might be able to do what I’m being asked to do. And that person might view it as a professional development opportunity.”

Cross-training is not just for line-operation teams; it is good management practice at any level. As Patricia Sodomka, FACHE, executive director of the Medical College of Georgia, has learned, emergencies happen: “In the space of a week, our chief operating officer was hit by a car, and our chief financial officer developed appendicitis,” says Sodomka. “While they were out, we all had to pull together. It helped that we use a highly team-oriented process across the organization.”

If your team is prepared to do without you in emergencies, it also means you can take time away when you need to. Before she had four children of her own, Hurley’s Price watched other female healthcare professionals struggle to balance careers with motherhood. Says Price, “When I had my first child, I said, ‘I’m not going to come in and kill myself.’ So she developed a strategy. “I told my supervisor about my pregnancy as early as possible. About three months before I left, I put together a detailed plan—what projects I was involved in, what standing meetings I went to, what people I was working with. I sat down with my boss and outlined whom I had arranged to do what. With his approval, I appointed someone to work for me as interim vice president. And I reassured him that I would still be available by phone. I was out for 14 weeks. Things didn’t fall apart.”

This practice can also keep you from feeling like you are scheduled to within a nanosecond of your life, and enable you to enjoy the occasional spontaneous opportunity. Larry Tyler, FACHE, president of the Atlanta-based healthcare consulting firm Tyler & Company, knows that from experience. “Last year, I had the opportunity at the last minute to go to one of the practice rounds for the Masters golf tournament,” Tyler says. “Someone offered me the tickets the day before. I called my wife, who is associate general counsel for a Fortune 500 company. We were both able to clear our calendars and go. It was a great feeling.”
The Holistic Healthcare Executive: Balancing Personal and Professional Lives

Hire and train a staff assistant who can anticipate your moves. How well you and your administrative assistant work together can determine how efficient each of you is individually. Says Georgia’s Sodomka, “It is extremely important to have a person who can anticipate what your approach is going to be with a particular piece of correspondence or phone call. They can present things in a way that you’re probably going to handle it.” Sodomka has found someone like that in her assistant, Kathleen Grant. “If we’re going into a meeting or tackling a particular problem, Kathleen has a good idea of what’s going to come out of that meeting and can keep things rolling.”

Don’t lose sight of personal rewards. Often, work/life balance is described as the act of juggling obligations to others—work, family, community. It is beneficial to periodically stop and locate yourself—your goals, your values—in the midst of that process. Perhaps there is a dream you want to pursue. Several years ago, Tyler carved out time to become an expert sailor. He did it by setting a series of goals for himself. “I took a basic sailing course,” he says. “The next year, I took an advanced course, and the following year I chartered a boat with a captain on board for a short time.” He continued, year by year, until he was qualified to serve as captain of his own boat.

Personal goals can consist of anything that gives you personal satisfaction—getting your finances in order and entered into a computer program, turning an attic room into a den, getting up an hour earlier to jog or take your dog to the park. Or it may be that spending time with your family is more fulfilling to you than any individual achievement. “My golf handicap will never be under 20,” notes Poudre’s Stacey. “I’ll never be as good a fly fisherman as I want to be. I will never develop a good turnaround jump shot. But if those are the sacrifices I make to spend time with my family, they’re worth it.”

The suggestion that one consider personal satisfaction might sound somewhat “me-oriented”—but if it prevents executive burnout, the whole organization benefits. Says Hurley’s Price, “People have this tendency to say, ‘That sounds kind of selfish.’ But once you get over that mental hurdle and find ways to have focus on yourself and your family, people don’t even notice you’re focusing on yourself, because things seem to run so smoothly.”

Make time for what matters to you. This is the strategy Intermountain’s Jeppson used to preserve his personal life. He set aside Mondays as family nights. He also made it a point to spend one-on-one time with each of his eight children at least once a month. And he learned to make sure his spouse got some respite. “My wife was spending a disproportionate amount of time raising our children,” Jeppson says. “One night, she decided our oldest son could take care of the younger children, and went down to a community park, where she sat on a bench and started to cry. Three of our sons were involved in a volunteer project to clean up the park that night. The next thing she knew, the boys were standing beside her, saying, ‘Mom, what are you doing here?’ Ever since then, my wife and I have set aside Friday as our weekly date night.”

Accommodating what is important may mean making compromises. For example, Georgia’s Sodomka and her husband, who have two children, have developed a rule: “If either of us has a business-related social function, the other will stay at home to keep the family life intact,” she says. “Sometimes it would be better if we had our partner along at these events, but it’s a choice we’ve made.”

What is important to you depends on your personal situation. Tyler recalls the time a long-term employee, who was single, suffered the death of a beloved dog. “She was devastated; she was out for four days. This dog had been with her for 10 years; it was her family.” In fact, while single or childless executives may not have the same kinds of responsibilities as those who are raising families, they...
do have relationships they depend on for emotional support—and those relationships need to be respected and maintained.

**a daily balance**

Each of the persons interviewed for this article has different personal and career circumstances, and their coping strategies vary. But each emphasized that balancing one’s work and personal lives is a day-to-day negotiation that involves knowing your values and mustering as much self-discipline as you can to live those values.

To do that, healthcare executives may need to challenge the notion that leaders must be single-minded careerists, and instead demonstrate that it is possible to view the personal and the professional holistically. By doing so, such leaders will set the example for current and future colleagues. As Hurley’s Price puts it, “It will take a few of us from my generation to bring about the changes that balance one’s personal and professional needs. My staff continue to talk about how, as a senior female manager, I took time off to have a baby and still carried out my responsibilities to the organization. It took me stepping out to say, ‘this is what I want to do, and this is how I’m going to do it.’”

Challenging the notion that leadership commitment is measured by personal sacrifice may be difficult, but as Intermountain’s Jeppson well knows, so is not challenging such expectations. Says Jeppson, “No career success will ever come close to compensating for a disaster in the family. We got to the brink in a couple of cases.”

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