

50 YEARS
WOMEN | MBA

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- Helping Women by Helping Men,
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• Research Symposium

GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

GENDER:
& WORK

HELPING WOMEN BY HELPING MEN, IMPROVING WORK BY IMPROVING LIVES

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- **Women are not well represented in the c-suite.**
- **Women more than men opt out of the work force.**
- **Women experience bias at work.**

These facts are well known. In response, people are increasingly realizing that the workplace must change. It is not enough to coach women on how to improve themselves -- i.e., to be more efficient and effective, have more confidence, stand up for themselves, lean in -- nor is it enough to provide them policies and practices to help them accommodate the traditional ways of working, i.e., flex-time, part-time, job sharing. But how do we challenge deeply held assumptions about how work is done and create more innovative, flexible *and also* more productive ways of working that are embraced by everyone as the new norm? Put simply, how do we create better work and better lives for everyone?

As a professor of organizational behavior and leadership, I naturally turn to the management world for insight. And, indeed there are many techniques aimed at improving work. Lean, Six Sigma, Organization Learning, Empowerment—to name but a few—are all techniques that focus on making the work better by inspiring employees to raise issues and work together to solve them. But where are the gains for people's lives? And where does the motivation to engage and, moreover, sustain these initiatives come from? While these initiatives have great promise to improve work, individuals are not eager to participate in yet another flavor of the month initiative that eats up time and has little upside for them personally.

I have come to realize that these “better work” initiatives might benefit from focusing on creating “better lives.” Imagine if seeking “better lives” became that much-needed motivation for people to engage in “better work” initiatives. Imagine if these “better work” initiatives were now able to live up to their potential for improving work and also keep their promise of sharing the benefits with individuals' lives. I call this approach *enlivening the team*, because people's lives are being brought into the team to spark improvements in the work and the team members' lives. I want to share a story that convinced me of the power of this approach.

The story

Eight years ago, I started a study with the management consulting firm the Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

After spending a year studying what BCG consultants do all day, and discovering that a major problem for consultants was not so much the travel nor long hours but the unpredictability of the work schedules, I proposed an experiment that had two core components:

- collective goal
- structured dialogue

Collective goal

The collective goal was to take off a predictable night each week, starting at 6 p.m. By off I really meant off. No connection to work, no checking wireless devices, no performing other firm-wide responsibilities outside one's direct work. Off meant spending time doing non-work related activities. And predictable time off meant it wasn't that you looked back at yesterday and could say, “I was off.” It was that you looked ahead, a month at a time, and identified each night you would be off, regardless of what would come up at work. You could tell your children that you were going to be at their softball game next Tuesday night and actually show up without your smartphone in hand.

This goal has several important characteristics.

It is of personal interest. Everyone at BCG could relate to the benefits of addressing the underlying problem of unpredictability. That is not to say everyone viewed the night off as the desirable solution to the problem; indeed, many didn't want a night off, especially while they were on the road. But still, everyone identified the goal as striving to do something for personal, as opposed to organizational, benefit.

It is a stretch but doable. The goal pushes consultants who are used to being connected 24-7 out of their comfort zone, but it is also doable; otherwise, people are compelled to give up the moment the work gets stressful.

It is collective and shared; it addresses something everyone at BCG views as a problem (unpredictability) and provides one goal around which they can rally – as opposed to a personal goal (as in so many firms where it has become about personal KPIs). It is essential that the goal is the same for everyone. Otherwise, there is an incentive to choose a small goal and to point fingers at the person who does take the time off. The goal also needs to be shared – it is not just about whether you can take your own time off, it is about whether you can work together to make it happen for each other.

It is concrete and measurable. People can track whether the goal is being adhered to.

In other organizations, the collective goal has been meeting-free days, working from home, email blackouts, quiet time, etc. At BCG, the goal was a predictable night off.

Structured dialogue

The second requirement is that the team engages in structured dialogue, which means the team gets together every week to have a conversation about *how* they are working. BCG already had weekly team meetings. What was being asked was to tack on an extra 30 minutes to the meeting and make attendance mandatory regardless of what else was going on.

In this meeting two things need to happen.

First, the team needs to review who has taken their time off last week and, if not, why not and what could they learn to do differently to protect time off in the coming weeks. They also need to review the upcoming calendar to ensure they plan and prioritize so that future time off can be taken as scheduled.

Second, they need to engage in the pulse check, which consists of four questions, each of which is to be answered by choosing from a range of emotive faces that go from a smiley face to a

blue, anguished face. (Imagine hard-core consultants choosing emotive cartoons to describe their feelings!)

The questions are:

- How are you feeling?
- Are you delivering value to the client?
- Are you learning and developing?
- Is the work sustainable?

Response

When I first proposed the idea of experimenting with these two components (a collective goal and structured dialogue), the head of the Boston office had no trouble relating to the problem of unpredictability or the possibility that this could be costly for the organization, but he was adamant that I couldn't do such an experiment on any of his teams. He did, however, allow me to wander around the Boston office and try to find another partner to do it. Despite having been at BCG as an ethnographer for over a year and having many longstanding relationships, it took me six months to find a partner willing to engage.

The experiment team

The partner on this team was a recent promote to partner and had three young children. His view was, *“if we can't find a way to take one night off a week there is something fundamentally wrong.”* So he agreed to participate, hoping to help himself, his team, and the organization.

The project manager on this team was an ex-Army, command-and-control type of leader with low upward feedback scores. He was less enthusiastic about the idea of researchers from Harvard Business School looking over his shoulder. He made it clear: *“I am the eyes, ears, arms, and legs for the client and it will not be possible to disconnect each week.”*

There were three consultants on the team. I should note this was a travel team, all from the Boston office with the client in Indianapolis. So the team flew out Monday morning and returned late Thursday night.

One consultant's best friend lived in Indianapolis. This consultant was excited about the possibility of being able to plan ahead and take time off, while on the road, when he could visit his friend.

Another consultant on the team was applying to graduate school and was appreciative of any time to work on her applications.

The third consultant was married to a doctor and wanted nothing to do with time off in Indianapolis and, moreover, nothing to do with anything that might lead to more work when he was home with his wife in Boston. He did not want work shifting to the weekend! We tried to reassure him that the goal was not to take time off during the week and work more on the weekend. Rather it was to find ways to better work together as a team. We promised this consultant, and the rest of the team, that if the experiment made their lives appreciably worse or had a negative effect on the client, we would halt the experiment immediately.

When it was the project leader's first night off he knew he needed to send a positive signal to his team so he agreed to take the night off. But he made it clear to us how resistant he was and how he was going to try it only this one time. The next day he described his drive back to the hotel, when it was 6:30 at night and he was wondering what to do as he had never had free

time during the week in Indianapolis. He wasn't hungry, so he decided to work out. He had rarely had a chance to do that while on the road. He went to the gym—smartphone in hand—started to run, had that urge to check his smartphone but knew that it was in violation of the experiment, and so he didn't. Before he knew it he had run ten kilometers. Then he went back to his room and called his wife. When, after a few moments she began to hang up, he said, “Honey, we can talk longer tonight” because he wasn't under the same pressure he normally was. He ordered room service and went to bed early. He came to work the next day having worked out, having had a good conversation with his wife, and having gotten a good night's sleep. He admitted, “Maybe there is something to this night off.”

Of the three consultants, two greatly enjoyed their first night off. The third, the one married to the doctor, had a bad sunburn so he was glad to have an evening to take care of it. But in the weeks that followed he remained quite resistant because he didn't feel like the underlying work process was changing and he had the same amount to do, just in less time.

This led to a very important conversation on this team. It was clear that if they were going to be able to preserve their nights off they would have to pull together and make sure it was working for everyone on the team. They needed to be willing to take risks, discuss what was going wrong, open up about their resistance, lay out problems, and find ways to rally together to make change. These conversations are a fundamental building block of why this turned out to be so valuable. At the end of the twelve weeks the team was extremely happy with the impact of the experiment, including the consultant married to the doctor who never learned to value the night off in Indianapolis but truly appreciated the impact that night had as a forcing function improving the team's efficiency and making other changes in the way they worked—including, importantly to him, beginning to change the travel schedule. The partner felt that the team was more open than he had ever experienced before, that they were raising work and personal issues, and most importantly, that they were working together to address the issues in ways that benefited the individuals' lives and the work itself. The work process was being challenged and tested, and new ways of planning and prioritizing were emerging. From the partner's perspective, not just the team but also the client benefited.

How it works

Why did a simple experiment to take a single, predictable night off each week and tack on thirty minutes to their case team meeting have such a profound and wide-reaching effect on this team, their work, and their lives?

The night off was a collective goal – it was not only legitimate to adhere to the goal but it was legitimate to raise issues about making it happen. The goal rallied the team around something small and doable to try each week to make happen. In the process they were forced to speak up about issues at work that would prevent them from taking their nights off that they never before would have raised. And then they worked together to create change. It built trust and openness and a sense that they could actually create change in things they never before thought could change – change in assumptions that they held about how the work had to be done. Suddenly they were empowered to speak up and act together... and they did. It was initially about a predictable night off but that was only the trigger; soon it was about all sorts of work-life issues – whatever was troubling them personally became the catalyst to rethink the associated aspects of the work process.

From experiment to global rollout

Based on the success of this Midwest team (remember all the resistance to getting started), it became much easier to find other team leaders willing to participate. Each participant became a

champion of trying to work in this new way. We went to four more teams, then BCG embraced the initiative and together we took it to ten more teams. Five years later it is a global initiative at BCG that has included over two thousand teams in thirty two offices in fourteen countries. At this point, BCG has an internal team of thirty-plus consultants whom they take out of client-facing work for three to six months to support the effort globally.

The results

Why is BCG investing so much? The numbers speak for themselves: people who participated in PTO (what BCG calls the teams that are involved) were

- 21% more likely to say they had control over their work lives
- 47% more likely to find their work fulfilling
- 45% more likely to intend to stay at BCG
- 55% more likely to find their work processes efficient
- 45% more likely to find their work effective
- 13% more likely to feel they were delivering significant client value. Note, I find this number most compelling – given it started high and actually increased!

As the head of the Boston office says, “It does not make a tough job easy; it makes a tough job better.”

Improving work by improving lives (and improving lives by improving work)

What the findings suggest is that if one combines a small, doable, collective goal of personal interest with structured dialogue these feed off each other in a productive way. The collective goal legitimates the conversation about a particular personal issue. If one person is not going to be able to take their night off, the pressure is on that person to raise the issue, in a culture where previously one would never dare say, “There is a big deliverable on Thursday but I just want to remind you it is my night off on Wednesday.” This leads to a productive discussion of what needs to get done and how best to do it. As people raise very clearly specified personal issues around the collective goal and see how they are received, they build trust, gain confidence, and further issues are raised. At the same time, because of the action-oriented nature of the collective goal, teams discover their capacity to create change in things they previously took for granted as unchangeable. And once that capacity is unlocked, as other personal issues are raised, other deeply held assumptions about how work is done are, for the first time, called into question, challenged, and often changed. The willingness to raise issues and take action amplifies with each personal issue that is raised and each change that is made. The process becomes generative, and the work process and people’s personal lives continue to benefit, only further reinforcing the commitment to the process and the investment people make in both raising and addressing issues. Hence seeking to improve lives serves to improve work and improving work in turn is done in a way that improves lives.

Helping women by helping men

Let’s return to where I started: the workplace must change to help women. I find that this approach of enlivening the team doesn’t just improve work and the lives of everyone involved but also starts to close the gender gap. Comparing data from before the initiative started to four years later, when it was embedded on almost every team in the Boston office of BCG, I find two things. I find significant improvements for both men and women along key work-life dimensions, but I also find disproportionately more improvement for women. Take the question about whether one has control over one’s work life; there is a 21% increase for those involved in the initiative. Before

the experiments launched, in 2008, the difference between men and women was 108%; four years later, in 2012, the gap had dropped to 1.7%. These findings suggest the power of changing work for everyone as a vehicle to help women (and men and work).

Small, doable change that team leaders can make

What am I most excited about? Individuals alone cannot change deeply ingrained ways of working. One clear example: if you turn off, the rest of the world does not. Hence, efforts to help individuals can only go so far. Yet the other extreme is not necessary either. We tend to view changing work as requiring big, organizational, heavily-resourced, top-down change. Most exciting to me, *enlivening the team* suggests that team leaders everywhere can start with very small, doable steps that result in significant progress for themselves, their teams, and ultimately their organizations. My dream is that people will stop waiting for the answer and get started now, working together to create change. That possibility is in our hands.

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